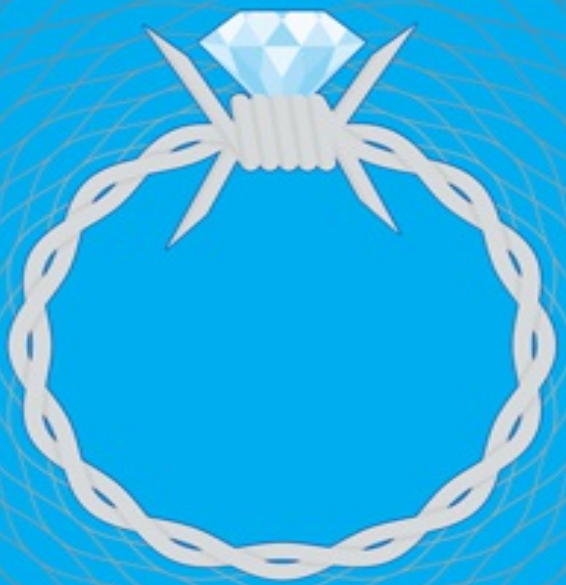
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HOW ABOUT A SIN TONIGHT?*

NOVONEEL CHAKRABORTY



Marry me, Stranger

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NOVONEEL CHAKRABORTY

Marry Me, Stranger

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Also by the same author

How About a Sin Tonight?
Ex

To you…

…the girl living alone in a big city full of strangers.

Prologue

FEBRUARY, 2014

She shut the elevator gate behind her and took a couple of steps to stand in front of her boyfriend's flat. She took out the duplicate key from her bag and put it inside the keyhole rather swiftly. With two full rotations, the door unlocked.

She was supposed to come two days later but the situation in Kolkata was such that she had to cut her trip short. She would have gone straight to her flat but she didn't want to miss an opportunity to surprise her boyfriend the way he would all the time. In fact, there were times when she would

wonder if she deserved the kind of maniacal care her boyfriend showered on her. The extent he went to bring a smile on her face scared her because she knew she was getting used to his attention. She knew well-enough that this getting-used-to is to a relationship what pollution is to air—nothing happens immediately, but when you inhale the polluted air for long, you make yourself vulnerable to sickness. But she also thanked her stars that he happened to her right when she was on the verge of doubting the authenticity of love as a concept and kill something valuable within her forever.

Once inside the flat, she found herself standing in a pool of mess. *Typical him!* she thought and panned her sight around the room: the ceiling fan was switched on, the windows were open, the old pedestal fan had an underwear on top of it, a chips and biscuit packet was carelessly lying on the mattress, a pair of jeans had been thrown on the television stand while the doors of the almirah

were wide open. From somewhere inside the flat the sound of running water was distinctly audible. One by one she sorted the mess. After cleaning up the room, she called him to check his whereabouts.

'Hi baby, I've reached my place,' she lied.

'Great! I'll come there directly,' he said. There was a hunger in his voice that turned her on. As if he would eat her up the moment they met. Not that she would complain.

'No sweetheart. I have some work in office. You go to your place. I'll come there.'

'Aye aye, princess. But don't be late.'

'I won't.'

Ending the phone call, she closed her eyes and let out a sigh. She then envisioned herself cooking Chinese for him, then dining with him in the soft candlelight that she had brought with herself from Kolkata after which they would...

She opened her eyes and blushed reminiscing about her first orgasm he had introduced her to on

her birthday a month ago. She never thought her body was capable of giving her such ridiculously intense pleasures. Until that night, she had never felt so weak and strong at the same time. She smiled to herself imagining his athletic physique—strong broad shoulders, a pronounced worked-out chest, and a narrow waist. He was much taller and broader than her and she always felt safe in his arms. There was a magnetic manliness about him, a smell of sex that he carried which made her seek out lust in the love she had for him. She could respond to her lust with to-the-point-answers whereas love always asked her questions for which there was no specific answer. It was easier to generalize lust than love.

The possibility of a carnal encounter that night made her opt for a Brazilian wax the day before. Her roommate had once told her it would increase her pleasure during foreplay.

She took a shower in his bathroom; it was not the first time she had done so. Applying his used soap made her feel more connected to him. She was in the middle of her shower when she heard her phone ring. She stepped out of the shower and grabbed the phone kept on the cemented pedestal by the bathroom window. It was him. She swiped her thumb on the screen and pressed the speaker button.

'Hey, where are you?' he asked.

'I'm going to office. And you?'

'I'm in the middle of something. I'll reach home late. Just wanted to check on you. See you soon sweetheart. Bye.'

She ended the call and stepped back into the shower after placing the phone on the pedestal. As the water drops cascaded down her body, washing away the white froth of the soap, she wondered if her boyfriend was trying to outsmart her. *Was he going to come home early?*

After a prolonged shower, she rummaged through the clothes in her bag and pulled out a yellow tank top and a pair of denim shorts. She prepared some coffee for herself and, relaxing on the bean bag by the window, took leisurely sips while surfing her Facebook newsfeed on her mobile phone. There were a few 'comments' from her friends who wrote saying they loved her new profile picture. She thanked them and logged out. In no time, sleep snatched her from reality.

She woke up late and wasted no time in preparing her boyfriend's favourite cuisine—Chinese. Once the smell started teasing her olfactory senses, she thought of checking on him. The moment she picked up her phone, there was a power cut. *That's strange*, she thought. It was the first power cut she had encountered in the area. She unlocked her phone quickly and checked the time: 9:05 pm. She was contemplating whether to

call her boyfriend or not when she heard the main door unlock.

I was right! He is being smart. She switched the light of her phone off with an amused face. With cat-like alertness, she trotted toward the drawing room. As she stood by the entrance, waiting to pounce on her boyfriend and take him by surprise, she sniffed a certain masculine fragrance approaching her. It came from a cologne—'Just Different' by Hugo Boss—which her boyfriend always used in abundance. She could smell him close now. She knew if she stretched her hand, she would feel him. And she did exactly that.

'Caught you!' she said and before she knew it, she was blindfolded with a ribbon. She immediately recollected sharing a similar fantasy with her boyfriend once: making love blindfolded. *Was it going to be fulfilled tonight?* she wondered and suddenly started craving for a quick communion. She lifted both her hands to feel him

but they were grabbed with an empowering strength and handcuffed.

'What's this?' she said with mixed emotions. In a flash she was lifted up by a strong pair of arms, flipped, and literally thrown on the mattress in the drawing room.

'You are really in the mood tonight, aren't you, hon?' she said and lifted her leg up, not allowing him to come on top of her immediately. Her feet touched his clean shaven face. He was sweating. She liked it. Slowly she took her feet down to his bare chest. She liked the fact that he was already out of his tee. She hadn't witnessed such aggressive behaviour from him before. He was always powerful but soft with his lovemaking. And the fact that he wasn't talking was making it all the more intense.

A hand grabbed her right leg and moved it away from his chest. Then she felt something like a rope being tied around her calf. It was only when she

felt another rope being tied on her left calf that she felt something was wrong. *Very wrong*. With one strong pull, her legs were parted. She called out her boyfriend's name but there was no response. If he wanted to be rough, he could have told her. She needed it as much as he did. But now he was scaring her more than pleasuring her.

'Talk to me dammit!' she said, exasperated, only to feel a piece of cloth being stuffed into her mouth. She used all her energy to revolt, to free herself, to plead. In the dark quietude she heard her phone ring. She went numb when she heard the ringtone. It was the customized ringtone she had set only for her boyfriend. He was calling her. Was her boyfriend playing a game with her by calling her from within the room? Or, could it mean the person she was with was not her boyfriend? She felt like her guts were falling out. The phone ring stopped. The nerves on her neck became tense as she started screaming her lungs out but no cry escaped her

mouth. She tried to sit up but was again pinned down on the mattress with one push. She felt a cold metal touch her outer thighs. She realized her shorts were being cut into half, probably, by a pair of scissors. She wanted to move her legs but knew she would only injure herself in the process. She remained still, holding her breath, as the scissors slowly cut her tank top open. The next moment her breasts juggled out as her top and bra was taken off with one single pull. Embarrassment clouded her mind. Before she could fidget, she felt the last bit of clothing—her panty—being torn apart. For sometime nothing happened. She prayed hard in her mind it was a nightmare. Why would anyone do this to her? It couldn't be her boyfriend. Or could it still be him? Except for her stark nudity, she was sure of nothing. It was only when her breathing turned back to normal that she felt someone sniffing her face. She could feel his breath—it smelt of mint—but she couldn't do much. The sniffing

tickled her and made the hair on her nape stand right up. Then he rubbed the nose on her throat, her nipples, dipped the tip of his nose on her belly button, once, and lastly blew out a gentle breath on her waxed vagina. She knew she was wet and it added to the concoction of arousal, fear, and embarrassment that she found herself in. She felt the palm of his hand cover her vagina. It made her feel warm and acutely aroused. She wanted to draw her legs as a reflex but couldn't. Again, nothing happened for some time after which she felt the tip of his tongue circle her inner thighs, her navel, her nipples, and her arm. A sensual tickle made her body wriggle. The tickle also made her listen to certain music within her whose notes were grossly sexual in nature. And these notes had distracted her enough to stop fighting back.

'Ummm...mmmm...mmm…' she exclaimed in a muffled voice, at the zenith of her arousal. Something told her she would be penetrated any

moment. The wait made her crave for it even more. But the moment never came. Next she felt her face being dabbed by something soft, as if the person was taking off the light make-up that she had donned for her boyfriend. It postponed the obvious and added to her sexual ache all the more. *Cotton?* she wondered. After the make-up had been rubbed off, she felt a cloth being pressed on her nose. Within seconds, her consciousness deserted her slowly. *This isn't my boyfriend...this can't be my boyfriend...this has to be...*

1

MAY, 2013

Rivanah opened her sleep heavy eyes with a yawn, the saliva rolling down her mouth. Just before she could get out of her bed, her heart almost stopped seeing her own body hanging from the ceiling fan in her room. The hanging figure was wearing the same nightdress as her, looking dead straight at her with a lurid vengeance. As their eyes met, the hanging figure started chuckling. Rivanah wanted to get up and run out of the room but felt herself glued to the bed. Soon the ominous chuckle got so loud she thought she would go deaf. She

woke up for real just before the dream could get any worse.

It was the month of May and Kolkata was both hot and humid. Irrespective of the weather, Rivanah had a habit of keeping the air conditioner on at the lowest temperature it could be set to, using a blanket to cover herself up with. She let go of a heavy breath as if she was letting go of the dreaded feel that the nightmare had built inside her. She had seen the same dream one more time before. It had made her break into a cold sweat then. She stretched her hand and picked up her Samsung S3 phone from beside her pillow. It was 4:44 am. She knew the alarm would go off in a minute and it would be time for her new life: *Rivanah Bannerjee, Programmer Analyst, Tech Sky Technologies*.

Four months back, Rivanah had successfully cracked the campus interview for two IT companies during her penultimate semester of B.

Tech at Techno Asia College of Engineering in Salt Lake, Kolkata. One company had placed her in Bengaluru while the other in Mumbai with almost the same salary. When the company based in Bengaluru delayed its offer letter after she graduated as a computer engineer, Rivanah decided to join the one in Mumbai. Initially, her parents were apprehensive about her living away since she was their only child and had never stayed away from them before. Eventually they coaxed themselves because that was the demand of present times.

The alarm screeched for a microsecond before Rivanah silenced it. She tried to forget the bad dream by saying a short prayer, asking God's blessings for her new beginning. She climbed down from the bed and went out of her room, into the corridor that took one to the floor below. She leaned down from the staircase and noticed that the

tubelight of the kitchen was on. Her mother, as usual, was up before her.

'Mumma, keep my clothes on the bed,' she ordered with the air of a princess and went to the attached bathroom in her room. She quickly took a shower and came out of the bathroom to notice there was indeed a kurti and a pair of leggings on the bed, as demanded by her, but the outfit wasn't the one she had picked out in front of her mother the night before. What irritated her more was that the kurti wasn't from BIBA, her favourite kurti brand. It was one of those low priced kurtis her mother had purchased from a cheap store in Hathibagan.

'Mumma!' she screamed.

'What happened Mini?' her mother asked. She could tell her mother was climbing up the stairs.

'Where's the blue kurti, mumma? I told you I'll wear that today,' Rivanah asked making a face as her mother walked into the room.

‘I had given the blue kurti to Bishnu yesterday to get it ironed,’ her mother said with guilt, ‘but he didn’t return it last night. You’ll look good in this maroon one too.’

‘It’s not that, mumma. You know how particular I am about brands. If you would have told me the blue one was not available, I’d have chosen something else. Baba has already packed all my clothes.’ She sounded rude. Even Rivanah knew it. She saw her mother leave the room quietly. She immediately followed her downstairs to the kitchen to find her in tears.

‘I’m sure,’ her mother said wiping her tears with the loose end of her sari, ‘when you’ll stay alone in Mumbai you will be able to wear whatever you want to.’ Rivanah held her by the shoulders and turned to face her, saying, ‘I’m sorry mumma. You don’t know how much I’ll miss you and baba.’ She then kissed her mother’s cheeks and gave her a

tight hug. Her father appeared by the kitchen door, yawning.

'Did you miss your flight, Mini?' he said wiping the sleep off his eyes.

'No baba. But I will if I don't hurry up now. And please take out the new off-white kurti from my bag.' she said and went to her room.

It took her another twenty minutes to get ready. She joined her mother on the breakfast table where a steaming boiled potato meshed in rice and butter along with an omelette was waiting for her in a dish. She wanted to complain because rice and butter would add some extra kilos to her already voluptuous frame but she made a happy face instead and ate it. God knew when she would be back from Mumbai to have her mumma-made-food.

'What should I tell Shantu Mukherjee?' her father asked standing by her chair and gulping his normal quota of lukewarm water with a squeeze of lime in it.

‘You tell Shantu Mukherjee what you told Mrs Ganguly and everyone else who comes asking for my hand in marriage. I have a boyfriend, and even if I didn’t have one, I won’t ever marry a stranger,’ Rivanah shot back shoving a spoonful of the rice in her mouth.

Both her mother and father stared at her.

‘What?’ she shrugged. ‘Why are you looking at me like that? You have already met Ekansh.’

‘We have and neither your mother nor I have objected knowing well he is not a Brahmin like us,’ Mr Bannerjee said.

Rivanah couldn’t believe her father had brought up such a trivial and dated matter. ‘How does it matter if Ekansh is a Brahmin or not? He doesn’t intend to earn his livelihood doing Durga, Saraswati, or Kali Pujo anyway.’

‘It matters to me,’ he said putting the empty glass down with a thud. ‘You don’t even let me talk to his parents.’

‘Baba, times have changed. I love Ekansh and he loves me too, but we haven’t discussed marriage yet.’

‘Not yet? Then what do you guys talk so much about?’ her mother chipped in.

‘About everything but marriage,’ Rivanah said finishing the rice and saw her mother shoot a furtive glance at her father.

‘I’ll tell you both when we are ready. Till then, no more marriage talk or proposals please.’

‘Abhiraj is an IIM pass out and...’

‘Who is Abhiraj?’ Rivanah stood up.

‘Shantu Mukherjee’s son.’

‘Baba, please!’

The parents sighed watching their daughter saunter to the washbasin.

‘Good that at least you went from Mrs Ganguly’s school teacher son to an IIM pass out. God, who marries a primary school teacher!’ she said rinsing her mouth with water.

‘Okay!’ she said and raised her hands in the air animatedly. ‘I will talk to Ekansh about marriage but don’t give me that look now.’

Her parents heaved a sigh of relief.

Mr Bannerjee drove her to the sprawling new Netaji Subhash Airport in their Alto. The moment he halted the car near one of the departure gates, he turned to Rivanah and said, ‘Mini, I called your Meghna di last night. She won’t be able to...’

‘...come to the airport because she has office so I’ll have to take a Meru Cab from the airport itself and go to her place, take the keys from the security guard, and get in. This is the fourth time you’ve told me this baba.’

She climbed out of the car along with her parents.

Her mother shot a sly smile at her husband and murmured, ‘*Meye boro hoye geche, bujecho?*’

Mr Bannerjee nodded in agreement. Their daughter had indeed grown up.

He tried to hide his anxiety and said, ‘Take out your PAN card and the print out of the ticket. You will need to show it at the entrance gate.

Rivanah flashed both the ticket and the PAN card at him with a smile. They walked her till the entry point after which she touched their feet and kissed them goodbye. She had not thought this moment would feel so heavy before but now, looking at her parents waving at her with sad faces, she thought it would have been better had she been placed in Kolkata itself.

Rivanah slept through most of the smooth 2 hour, 40 minutes flight to Mumbai. She woke up when the sun’s rays kissed her face through the aeroplane’s window. The view outside made her stealthily click a couple of pictures from her phone which was on airplane-mode. *I will send them to Ekansh once my flight lands,* she thought. It had been two months since they had last met each other. She checked out pictures of them together on her

phone. One album contained pictures they had clicked the night before he flew to Bengaluru to join a software company. As she tapped on the pictures, every moment seemed to come alive as a memory. They had had dinner in Peter Cat restaurant in Park Street that night. He was looking dapper in a black round-neck tee and jeans while she was in an Anarkali salwar-suit. Post dinner, they had silently walked hand-in-hand giving each other furtive romantic glances without really talking. Finally, they had kissed standing behind a fused street lamp near her place.

'A kiss means a part of me will forever trust you. A kiss means a part of you will forever reside in me. A kiss means a part of us will forever forgive each other,' Ekansh had said looking deep into her eyes right after their short kiss. Then they had smooched while her eyes cried warm tears. The flight attendant tapped on her shoulder lightly to take her order for the in-flight meal. Rivanah,

realizing her eyes were moist, quickly took out her shades and covered her eyes. How much fun would it have been if she was employed in Bengaluru too? She was ready to wait for the Bengaluru-based company's offer letter and let the Mumbai one pass but Ekansh told her about an impending recession and asked her to join the company she had got an offer from. Then later, she could perhaps move to a different company in Bengaluru. It made sense then but sitting in the flight all she wished was if she could spend all her life in his arms; no work, no reality, nothing to disturb them.

Her mother called the minute the flight landed. Rivanah kept assuring her the journey was fine and that she was alright.

'Now keep the phone down, mumma. My phone's on roaming. I'll call when I reach Meghna di's place.' She disconnected the phone and asked around for where the pick-up point for Meru cab was. She found her pre-booked Meru cab waiting

to take her to her destination. The driver helped her keep the luggage in the trunk and soon drove her out of the airport.

'Goregaon east mein kahan, madam?' the driver asked.

'Vishnu Dham,' she said and quickly updated her Facebook status: *Travelled alone for the first time. Mumbai feels awesome!*

Next she called Ekansh from her phone.

'Hey babu, I'm in *aamchi* Mumbai!'

'How does it feel?' he asked.

'It's...it's...' She was about to respond when her eyes fell on something beside her on the cab's seat. It may have been there when she got in, but she didn't notice it before.

'One second,' she told Ekansh and took her time to grab the neatly ironed blue kurti. It seemed like an exact replica of the one that she wanted to wear in the morning. *Or was it the same one?* She was intrigued.

'I'm calling you back,' she said and cut the call. Rivanah checked the kurti's brand: BIBA. Size M. Her brand, her size.

'Yeh kiska hai?' she asked the driver. He quickly flipped his head for once but seemed clueless about it.

'Mereko nahi pata madam.'

Maybe it's another passenger's, Rivanah guessed though doubting her own thought. She was about to keep the kurti back where it was kept when the driver responded that she was his first passenger for the day. With a frown she averted her eyes back to the blue kurti and unfolded it this time to examine it properly. Something fell off from its fold. It was a piece of white cloth with something embroidered in black in the middle. She picked it up and saw it was a message:

Be ready Mini.

Her throat went dry. Only her parents called her by that name.

2

The first thing Rivanah did after stepping inside Meghna's one bedroom-hall-kitchen flat, taking the keys from the security guard, was call her mother up.

'Did you send the blue kurti, mumma?' She had brought the kurti with her and was looking at it sitting by the couch with one ear pressed to the phone.

'Blue kurti? Which blue kurti?' Her mother sounded clueless.

'The one I wanted to wear this morning but you said Bishnu hadn't returned it.'

‘Oh, don’t ask about that. I went to Bishnu after you left but he said he had lost it.’

Rivanah felt a lump in her throat. How, or more importantly, *why* was the kurti in the cab with her name stitched on that white cloth? A blue kurti from Biba could have been a coincidence but a blue kurti with a cloth having a message for someone by the name of ‘Mini’ couldn’t be just a coincidence.

‘But why are you asking this?’ her mother asked.

‘Just like that,’ Rivanah blurted. She knew if she told her mother about the sudden appearance of the kurti, it would only worry her and she would ask a series of questions after that. It was only a kurti and a message—nothing more. *Does the incident deserve my attention? Does it even matter?* Rivanah thought and heard her mother say, ‘How is Meghna?’

‘I have just come, mumma. Meghna di is in office.’

Meghna was Rivanah's paternal uncle's daughter. She worked as a senior copy editor with an advertising agency and had married a Muslim colleague of hers. The marriage was considered blasphemy in her family and most of the Bannerjee family had boycotted her except for Rivanah's parents. Though they didn't support her decision, they did stay in touch with her for their own daughter's sake. They knew one day Rivanah would get a job and if she had to travel to Mumbai, then Meghna could be of help.

It was late evening when Meghna returned home from office. Rivanah was never close to her cousin but she secretly admired her for the stance she took —especially the way she stood up to her parents for her love. It wasn't easy to do so. Meghna inspired her to listen to her heart, so if anyone stood against her and Ekansh's love, she too would follow in her footsteps.

‘So nice to see you di! After...’ ‘Three years,’ Meghna said. ‘We haven’t met since I got married.’ There was an awkward silence which Rivanah eventually broke by saying, ‘When will jiju be home?’

‘He will be late.’ Rivanah strongly felt the sense of indifference in her voice but she didn’t probe.

After dinner, Rivanah pulled out the sofa, turning it into a bed. Aadil, Meghna’s husband, was still not home.

‘Won’t you wait for jiju?’ she asked Meghna when she saw her getting ready for bed.

‘What’s there to wait? He’ll come when he has to. You sleep tight darling,’ Meghna said and went to the bedroom.

Rivanah’s mother had categorically asked her not to tell Meghna anything about Ekansh. Though she wasn’t in touch with the Bannerjee family, her mother didn’t want to give any relative a chance to talk ill about her daughter, especially when she

knew Ekansh wasn't from their community. Rivanah had agreed. It was only when she heard Meghna's soft snores, standing stealthily by the bedroom door, that she dialled Ekansh's number from the drawing room. The moment he picked up the phone, he showered non-stop kisses, amusing her in the process. He sounded like an adorable puppy who had been missing its master for long. She was happy to be in love with a boy who was so crazy about her.

'Statue!' she said and Ekansh went quiet. Rivanah took over from him and continued with the non-stop 'muah-shower'. He should also know the girl he wooed in college was as crazy as him.

They had studied in the same college but had met each other for the first time during a hunger strike in their college ground against a professor's heinous beating of a student. Ekansh Tripathi was from the Mechanical branch and she was from Computer Science. It was while screaming her

lungs out during the protest with a large group of students who had assembled in the ground that she noticed Ekansh, sitting diagonally from her, put his hand inside a sling bag and then swiftly transfer something into his mouth. He was putting up a pretence of shouting the slogan when he was actually eating something! Rivanah slowly moved toward him and said, 'Shame on you!'

Ekansh turned sideways and gave her a guilty look.

'Finish it fast.' Ekansh quickly swallowed the rest of it and then quipped, 'I'm sorry.' He had to shout into her ear to mitigate the shouts of the other students.

'Don't you know we are on a hunger strike? What were you eating?' Rivanah said with a suspicious face. Ekansh put his hand back in his sling bag and drew out a closed fist. Rivanah knew it had something. He forwarded his hand as she opened her palm. It was a dry laddu.

‘Mom gave it to me this morning,’ Ekansh’s smile had two shades to it—stupidity and nervousness.

‘Such a mumma’s boy you are,’ she said with sarcasm and gobbled the full laddu like Ekansh did a moment back.

‘Please don’t tell anyone,’ Ekansh pleaded.

‘Only if you give me one more laddu.’

He quickly took out another one and gave it to her.

‘God, I don’t know when this stupid strike will get over. I’m so damn hungry,’ she said to herself and gobbled the second laddu as well. With a mouthful of laddu, Ekansh felt like she was the cutest girl he had ever seen in his life.

‘Want to have more?’ he asked. She nodded. He quickly gave her another and said, ‘I’m Ekansh Tripathi. First year, Mech. And you?’

Every laddu was followed with a question from him and an answer from her. Before they knew it,

the noise around stopped being a distraction and they hit it off like a house on fire. Everything in him seemed to be complimenting everything in her. Once done with the laddus, they added each other on Facebook from their phones and by the time the students dispersed from the ground, they had fed each other's numbers in their phone book as well. For the next three years in college, both became a source of hope for other couples. People broke-up, ditched, deceived, toyed right, left, and centre but their bond only grew stronger. They were tagged as FTC by their batch mates. FTC meant a Fairy Tale Couple. There were students who, looking at them, longed to be in love and there were students with multiple heartbreaks who were envious of them. Students in their respective batches were confident that if ever their story would be written, it'd turn into a runaway bestseller. True love, they often told their batch mates, was like stardom; anyone can get it but not everyone.

Ekansh was the most balanced boy Rivanah knew existed. He never shouted at her, never abused her, never even touched her the wrong way. There were times when she would go hyper about a matter but he would help her calm down, making her understand how unnecessary it was. Ekansh not only loved her, he inspired her, encouraged her, and in a way spoilt her emotionally as well by making her believe that there was someone for her to fall back on.

During their fourth year in college, they introduced each other to their parents as each other's best friends. They were young and both agreed on the fact that it would be better if they let their parents know about the seriousness of their relationship only after they were financially independent. One incident Rivanah would never forget was the day she met with an accident on her way to college. A bus had hit her while she was standing with her back to the road. She was

immediately rushed to the nearest hospital. It was one of her exam days. When one of her friends messaged Ekansh about it, he left his exam midway and rushed to the hospital. He got a 'back' on that paper, which he could have topped otherwise, but he never complained to her about it. His selflessness made her love him even more.

The first major twist in their story came when he got a job in Bengaluru after college and had to stay away from her; the first time in four years. They were momentarily happy when Rivanah too cracked a company which would have placed her in Bengaluru but with the sudden turn of events, she was now in Mumbai while he was still in Bengaluru.

'I can always come down to Mumbai. It's not that far,' he said to Rivanah on the phone as she ensconced on the sofa-cum-bed.

'And what exactly will we do here, Mr boyfriend?' Rivanah had a naughty tinge to her

voice.

'I have a friend who lives alone in Mumbai. He has office on Saturdays,' Ekansh giggled on the phone.

'My naughty baby. It's been so long. When will we get to stay together?'

'Why? What can we do staying together that we can't now?'

'Oh no, we aren't going that way tonight. Di is here.'

For the next half an hour, had the most amazing phone sex. With her eyes on the small passage leading to the bedroom, hoping Meghna doesn't appear there all of a sudden, and her mind fuelled by Ekansh's dirty words, she kept touching herself till a gigantic pleasure wave swept her off her conscious self. She didn't know when she fell asleep. She woke up with a start after hearing someone screaming. It was only then that she realized there were not one but two people in the

room. One was her sister and the other was her jiju. She could hear Aadil hurling abuses at Meghna and she reciprocating equally. She wanted to go inside the bedroom and see what the matter was, but their pitch scared her and she remained put. She picked up her phone to check if Ekansh was awake. It was 4:15 am. She was about to call Ekansh when she noticed a message on her phone from an unknown number. She opened it. It read: *Beware of the darkness that engulfs you in the form of light.*

Rivanah frowned and typed a reply: *Who is this?*

After sending the message, she checked the phone number. As she read the digits one by one, she could feel her heart beat ascend. It was the same as her phone number! She immediately called back at the number. The voice at the other end said exactly what she was expecting: 'The number you

are trying to reach is busy. Please try after sometime.'

Just then, another message popped up. *Don't waste your time, Mini. Know your worth.*

3

‘Can two people have the same phone number?’

It was the next morning and Rivanah was in an autorickshaw on her way to office. She had called Ekansh in the autorickshaw itself.

‘Two people with the same phone number? Maybe if the SIM card is duplicated, but I’m not sure if it can be done. Why are you asking?’

For a moment, Rivanah was lost in her thoughts. Why would someone duplicate her SIM? Even if someone did, the question was how? She had changed five mobile phones from the time she bought her first, but the SIM card was the same since her first phone in standard eleven. She used

to keep her phone with her twenty-four-seven. Only thrice had her phone been away from her for a considerable amount of time. One was when she had forgotten it in a cab but later found it thanks to the honest driver. The second time was when she had misplaced it somewhere in college. She had to buy a new phone after that but was able to reactivate the same phone number for herself. And third was when her purse was robbed in a local train while she was travelling to a friend's house to Khorda from Bidhan Nagar station a few days after her graduation. But she only thought it was stolen. She had found the bag in the train's compartment itself while getting down.

'Hello? You there?' Ekansh asked.

'Yeah, sorry.' Rivanah's trance broke. She tried to get all this out of her mind and focus on her new life ahead. It was her first day as a working professional.

‘Why are you asking about the same phone number?’ Ekansh said.

‘A friend asked,’ she lied so he wouldn’t prod further and said, ‘Anyway, I’m on my way to office. It’s my first day. Wish me luck babu.’

‘My best wishes are always with you. Have a great day ahead. And be confident.’

‘Thanks!’

‘Call me whenever you are free.’

‘Sure.’

◆

Tech Sky Technologies had three branches in Mumbai but luckily for Rivanah, she had to join the Goregaon east branch which was two kilometres from her sister’s place. She climbed out of the auto and paid the driver. She then came and stood right in front of the humungous building, clicked a quick selfie, and Whatsapped the image to Ekansh with three kiss smileys. Five kisses came in as a

response. She smiled and took a deep breath looking high up at the Tech Sky building. She had been waiting for this moment since a long time and it was finally here. For an outsider it was just a building where people came and worked, but for her it would give her an identity that she had studied hard to attain. It was also a symbol for her impending financial freedom.

'Rivanah Bannerjee, you are a corporate girl now,' she said to herself as she entered the premise feeling jubilant.

The first day was more about submission of documents and certificates, meeting some of the other freshers, and undergoing an orientation programme where an HR personnel from the company briefed the newcomers about Tech Sky's corporate goals, ambition, and what the company stood for. The appraisal process for the employees and other benefits and rights were discussed too. Coincidentally, the HR person who presented the

company profile to the freshers was Prateek Basotia—Rivanah's senior from school.

'I thought I knew this face when you came in but then I wasn't sure if it was really you,' she said once Prateek came over to her with a guess-who smile after the presentation.

'But I was looking forward to meet you today,' Prateek said.

'Huh?'

'I have been following you on Facebook since a year now. I read your post about Tech Sky's recruitment.'

'Oh, then why didn't you message me?'

'I wanted to but I thought maybe you won't recognize me.'

'Come on!' Rivanah exclaimed and recollected her last meeting with Prateek. She was in the tenth standard while he was in the twelfth. He had proposed to her a day before Valentine's Day that year, but his geeky image in school and caution

from friends that he was a weirdo pushed her to publically turn his proposal down. She had not seen or heard from him since. And even now he seemed as unsure in front of her as he did in school. He rarely looked straight at her while talking. As if he was running the danger of getting slapped by her anytime.

'I was there with you on the flight to Mumbai a day before. Your seat number was 17 A while mine was 19 D,' he said in a matter-of-fact manner.

'What? Why didn't you approach me?'

'It would have spoiled today's surprise,' he smiled. 'I was in Kolkata on a holiday. Anyway, where are you putting up here?'

'At my cousin's place in Goregaon east itself. Do you stay here with your family?'

'No. Mom and dad are in Kolkata. I stay in Andheri west. I've been working for Tech Sky for over a year now.'

An awkward silence followed whereby neither knew what else to talk about.

'This is wonderful,' Prateek said with a sudden animated gesture, 'Never knew fate would let us meet again.'

Rivanah found the last statement bordering on it's-my-chance-to-impress-you-again.

Prateek received a message on his phone and excused himself while Rivanah went back to her desk. She stumbled upon him later in the evening inside the office elevator when she was about to leave office for the day. He requested for her phone number.

'This sounds like a Kolkata Vodafone number,' he said saving the number on his phone.

'I didn't get time to switch to a local number yet.'

'I would suggest you go for a corporate post-paid connection, otherwise it may take time.'

'Okay.'

‘Don’t worry, I’ll help you out with it.’

He still loves me, Rivanah concluded, feeling good about herself.

‘Should I drop you home? I have a bike,’ Prateek asked with childlike enthusiasm once they stepped out of the elevator.

‘Thanks but I’ll walk.’

She could sense the disappointment in him.

‘Okay. See you.’

He was about to leave when Rivanah stopped him on a hunch.

‘Is there any opening in Tech Sky for someone with a three months’ experience?’

Prateek thought for a moment and said, ‘Not right now.’

‘Okay. If I forward you a CV, could you please let me know whenever there’s an opening?’

‘Sure. Mail me. My id is prateek.b@techsky.com’

Rivanah typed some gibberish on her phone to show she was indeed jotting down the id and said, 'I will ask my boyfriend to mail you directly.'

Prateek's response came a little late.

'Great! Take care.'

Rivanah knew Ekansh would never mail him his CV nor would she ask him to but it was her way of telling Prateek that she was in a committed relationship in case he still harboured any thoughts of proposing to her again. School was still manageable but working in the same office, she didn't want to end up in an awkward situation.

She came out of the office premises and was looking for an autorickshaw when Prateek slowed down his bike in front of her.

'Say hi to Ekansh,' he said.

For an instant she was flummoxed. 'How do you know his name?' Rivanah couldn't help but exhibit her surprise a little too overtly.

‘I told you,I’ve been following you on Facebook since a year.’ He drove off before she could see his expression.

He already knew she was committed and yet…

4

Rivanah was supposed to ‘officially’ join Tech Sky Technologies on the Monday of the following week, giving her a lot of free time to kill before that. All that time made her realize she had no friends in Mumbai. There were some people from her college and a few from her batch working in the city, but they weren’t really ‘friends’ with whom she could hang out. And Ekansh had categorically told her before she left Kolkata that once she was on her own in Mumbai, she shouldn’t trust anybody.

‘When you move out of your home everyone connects to you with an agenda. At times the

agenda is clear from the beginning and at times it is clear only when the person has fulfilled it through you. But by then it's often too late for damage control,' he had said.

Though Rivanah was 22-years-old, she still didn't have a natural instinct of judging the real face of a person. Ekansh was her only help. This was yet another thing she loved about him. He was what she was not. As a couple, it's the one thing that becomes important once you go out in the real world. Two blind people can never cross the highway of reality together. She was the one who did things on an impulse and then thought what went wrong whereas Ekansh was the cautious one who weighed the pros and cons before going ahead with anything. His maturity was uncommon for boys of his age and she adored that about him. One thing he always told her was to be extra alert of guys who always took the first initiative to talk to her.

‘Then what should I do? Should I take the initiative instead?’ she said.

‘No stupid! What I mean is if you find a guy trying to talk to you all the time, even when he knows you aren’t interested, stay cautious.’

‘Hmm. Do you do that too? Talk to a girl even when she isn’t interested?’ she teased him.

‘Only when she is as hot as you,’ he giggled back.

‘I’ll kill you,’ She shot back.

Two days before her official joining, Prateek What-sapped her in the morning and asked if she was free in the evening for coffee. She was a little apprehensive in the beginning and didn’t know what to say. The last time she didn’t comply when he wanted to drop her home. Now this. Rivanah didn’t want to come across as a snobbish bitch. School days were fine but now they were in the same office and more importantly, he was in the HR department. Rubbing someone the wrong way

even before she joined office was something she couldn't afford at this point. She thought of asking Ekansh once. She even typed a message but deleted it on second thoughts. She knew he would never say yes to her going out for coffee with any other guy. But why was she being so uptight about it? It was only coffee! Being in a relationship with Ekansh had dissected her from within into two Rivanahs: the impulsive Rivanah and the trying-to-be-mature-like-Ekansh Rivanah. While the two were duelling it out, Prateek messaged again saying they would be in Goregaon itself (in Oberoi mall to be specific). The impulsive Rivanah won.

Great! I will pick you up by 6. Okay? Prateek messaged immediately after she said yes.

The trying-to-be-mature-like-Ekansh Rivanah thought for some time and messaged: *I'll come there on my own.*

She reached Oberoi mall on time. They went to Moshe's and took a table for two.

‘This colour doesn’t suit you,’ Prateek said pouring two sugar sachets onto his coffee.

For a moment Rivanah didn’t know what he was talking about. Then she noticed him looking at her top. ‘But I love blue,’ she said.

‘But I think you will look good in black.’

‘I don’t like black,’ Rivanah shot back. She loved black as well but she said otherwise as a reflex action. She didn’t like Prateek’s patronizing tone. And it was right then that the trying-to-be-mature-like-Ekansh Rivanah taunted the impulsive Rivanah: *I told you it will be a mistake meeting Prateek for coffee. Who knows he may still be harbouring feelings for you. Don’t you know people always remain vulnerable toward their first love and interpret any unintended action as a positive signal to proceed?*

‘Don’t mind but I feel Indian attire suits you more than western. I loved the way you looked in

office on the first day. The kurti fit you just perfectly.'

Mr School-lover trying to play Mr Husband, huh?

'Is that an S3? You could have bought an iPhone instead. It's better,' he said and forwarded his iPhone to her.

She excused herself to go to the washroom where the impulsive Rivanah convinced her to leave as soon as possible lest she said anything unpleasant. She came back and told Prateek that her sister had called and that she needed to accompany her to the vegetable market because she was all alone.

'Please don't mind,' she said picking up her Vera Moda bag.

'But your coffee?'

'Di is waiting. I'm so sorry.'

Before Prateek could say anything more, she was gone. On her way down the escalator she

promised herself: *No more coffee with Prateek. Phew!*

By the time Rivanah reached her sister's place, the cook was done preparing dinner: chapattis which were as thin as papad, a dry bhindi ki sabzi, and a bland dal. It was the same thing Rivanah had been having since the past five days. She didn't know why her cousin never complained. How can someone eat the same dull food every day? She decided she wouldn't eat that night. But soon the tumultuous hunger in her took precedence and she ate the food silently. Seconds later, she spat out the bolus in the dustbin and proceeded to prepare Maggi noodles, burnt the pan where she was boiling water, hid it in the sink amongst other utensils in utter frustration and called her mother.

'The cook here is such an idiot mumma,' she said.

'At your age I used to cook for my entire joint family, Mini. I used to tell you so many times to

learn to cook basic food so you could at least sustain yourself in situations like these but...'

'Mumma, I'm a programmer analyst not some home-maker.'

'Youngsters like you only think of careers all the time. Now boil your career for two minutes and have it for dinner.,'

'Oh mumma, I'm hungry and you are lecturing me instead of providing me with a solution.' There was a beep on the phone. Ekansh's call was on waiting.

'Maybe I'll order something. Call you later.'

'But what will you order?' Before Mrs Bannerjee could get a response, she switched the call.

'Hey babu, why are you calling so early tonight? What happened?' she said. Usually Ekansh called her after eleven at night.

'I...I...' Ekansh drawled as if he was choking on something. Rivanah had a bad feeling about this.

‘Ekansh?’ Her heart missed a beat. ‘Are you crying?’

‘Just...look outside,’ he said.

Rivanah rushed to the window in the room with her heart in her mouth. Ekansh was standing on the footpath across the building, waving at her excitedly with a huge grin on his face.

‘Come down. Quick!’ he said and cut the line.

Rivanah changed from her shorts and tank top to jeans and a tee and rushed down the building.

‘Ekansh!’ She was exhilarated to see him. She crossed the small lane to reach him and hugged him tight for a minute before she heard him speak.

‘People are watching,’ he said softly into her ears.

‘I don’t care.’ She broke the hug and looked deep in his eyes.

‘I missed you.’

‘Tell me about it. But how come you are here?’ Rivanah was yet to believe she wasn’t imagining

Ekansh's Mumbai visit.

'Because my life is here,' he said with a smile which made her all the more excited.

She immediately kissed him on his cheeks and said, 'Idiot, you could have told me. I would have come to receive you at the airport. I'm totally free till Monday, remember?'

'I wanted to surprise you, but why the hell are you crying, stupid?' Ekansh said rubbing her eyes. Rivanah was a tad conscious.'Thanks for coming,' she blurted, adding, 'I'm hungry. Let's have dinner.'

'I can eat a horse myself,' he said.

They laughed and took an autorickshaw to Goregaon railway station and then took the local train. Before getting down at Churchgate, Rivanah called her sister and told her that she was with friends and would be late. Meghna didn't care much.

Ekansh took Rivanah to the famous roadside eatery Bade Miyan in Colaba where they ordered Badi roti and mutton rolls.

'The food is awesome. How do you know about this place?' she said finishing the hot roll in no time and burning her tongue slightly in the process.

'One of my colleagues is from Mumbai. I flew down with him this evening. He told me.'

'And when are you leaving?'

'Early morning tomorrow. I have office. I'll go to the airport directly after dropping you home tonight. I was just dying to meet you.'

'Awww. Me too,' she said giving him a soft hug.

After a sumptuous dinner at Bade Miyan, they walked till Marine Drive and sat there by the cemented barricade looking at the distant city line and feeling the cool breeze orchestrate an urge for companionship within them.

'I'm sorry,' she said.

Ekansh frowned and turned at her. ‘For what?’He budged as she moved her head from his shoulder and matched her sight with his.

‘I didn’t tell you but I met a guy this evening.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘He is just this school friend I met in office.’

‘Office?’

‘Prateek. He is in HR. He means no harm. I was feeling guilty that I didn’t tell you about it, that’s all.’

Ekansh looked at her for a moment and then leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

‘Honesty is the essence of every successful relationship.’

‘I know. And I won’t ever hide anything. I promise,’she said and quickly touched her lips to his, once, and then quickly looked around to see if anyone had seen her. By the time she looked back at Ekansh, she felt her lips being sucked by him.

She reciprocated for a few seconds and then pushed him back.

'When will we be in the same city?' she said.

'Just complete six months here. I'll then forward your CV to a few contacts I have made in office. Then we both shall be in Bangalore.'

'Same place?' she said.

'Same place!' he responded looking at her with an amused face.

'Same room?'

'Same room!'

'Same bed?'

'Same bed!'

Rivanah clasped his hand warmly and with a puppy face said, 'Let's get married.'

Ekansh looked at her as if she had just confessed she was an undercover agent.

'What? Why do you look surprised?' she quipped unable to interpret his looks.

‘You know my plans. I want to complete two years in this company first and then pursue MBA. That’s two more years and then we’ll happily get married.’

‘I know. I said it just like that. We are anyway too young to get married,’ she said resting her hand around his waist and head on his shoulder again.

‘Exactly. And what’s there in a marriage? As long as we are together, that’s all that counts.’

‘Right. There’s nothing more genuine and worthwhile than true companionship. But who will explain this to our parents?’

‘Seriously! A few days back my mom said they wanted to talk to your parents.’

Rivanah burst out laughing. Ekansh looked curious.

‘My parents always do that. Good God! I think we are the first couple caught up in a situation where our parents want to talk and get us married, but we are not letting them.’

They laughed in unison. It gave way to silence.

'Ekansh, do you think love can die?' Rivanah said with a tone which was a little serious for the occasion. Ekansh took sometime before replying.

'If love is based on priorities and conditions, it can certainly die because priorities and conditions keep changing in life all the time.'

'What is our love based on then?' she said tilting her head up and looking at him directly.

'Our love isn't anything specific. I think when love is something specific, there's a chance of losing it.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, if life is night, then our love is light bulbs. If life's a power cut, then our love will be a candle. If life's a traffic jam, then our love will be patience. It's nothing specific and yet it's something without which we won't ever be comfortable. Our love is a solution.'

'Wow!' she exclaimed and kissed his cheeks.

They sat there clicking selfies together; sometimes talking, sometimes silent. When Meghna called her around 11:30 pm asking about her whereabouts, she realized she had to get back home before her parents found out who she was with. They had asked her to be at home by 9 pm sharp, no matter what. A couple of hours back she had called her mother and told her that she had eaten dinner and was preparing to go to sleep.

They walked till the Baskin and Robbins outlet near Marine Drive, bought her favourite ice cream, and ambled till the Churchgate railway station. They took a Borivali bound slow local train whose compartment was mostly empty. They took a corner window seat away from the few other passengers.

'Can I tell you something?' Ekansh said.

'What?'

He took her hand and put it on his groin. Rivanah immediately pulled her hand away nervously feeling his hard-on.

‘What are you doing?’ she whispered.

‘Remember what you did in the bus on our trip to Mondarmoni from college?’

Rivanah clearly knew what he was talking about.

‘I can’t do it now.’

She was blushing. She looked away from him and out of the window with a sly smile.

Ekansh brought his sling bag and kept it over his lap so that it would cover her hand when it slid inside his pant. Rivanah turned to look at the bag once and then at him. The next instant, she slowly slid her right hand under the bag, unzipped his jeans, and grabbed his hard penis. She had felt it after months. Slowly she started jerking it looking around with an amused expression. Nobody had a clue what was going on. Ekansh laid his head back in bliss. Then she pinched the top and he shrieked out. The few passengers at the other end of the compartment gave them a nonchalant look. Rivanah

already had a naughty smile on her face as she jerked it with more force. Ekansh came within two minutes.

'Give me something to clean up,' she whispered. Ekansh gave her his handkerchief. She cleaned up with a face that was ready to burst out into laughter.

Someone on the opposite side of the train's compartment smiled looking at them. Neither Rivanah nor Ekansh knew that the person had ordered the same food which they did in Bade Miyan, had sat on the same cemented barricade of Marine Drive some distance away from them, and had bought the same flavoured ice cream which they did from Baskin and Robbins.

When Rivanah moved inside her sister's flat using the spare key she had given her on the first day itself, she received a message on her phone from her own number like she had a few nights ago.

You have a month's time to learn to cook Spanish Omelette, Kadhai Paneer, and Butter Chicken for yourself.

It wasn't funny anymore. She messaged back:

What? Who are you?

The reply came instantly:

Else I'll make you cry.

A deep frown appeared on Rivanah's face. She re-read the first message. All the three mentioned dishes were her favourite. On a hunch, she messaged back:

Is that you Prateek?

The reply came after a good one minute.

LOL.

5

Rivanah's team in office consisted of three men and herself. Her team lead was Sridhar Ram who was the most amicable man she had ever met. In the morning, he would tell all his team members what his expectations were of them and added that his only concern was if they did their work well. If they were able to do so before office time, they were free to use the residual time to their liking and he would save their asses in case senior management probed about it. Making time flexible for an employee, Sridhar believed, increased the overall productivity. But every person has a flaw and Rivanah soon realized Sridhar's flaw was he

would never look her in the eyes while talking to her. It was always her breasts as if they had a mouth of their own. It made her feel uncomfortable and irritated, and she wanted to complain to her teammates but couldn't since they themselves were a weird bunch. Bijoy was a porn addict who would watch dirty videos on the office computer and forget to minimize the window whenever Rivanah approached him. Somehow he scared her and she maintained a safe distance from him. Shantanu was someone who would give her furtive glances all the time but rarely spoke to her directly. And Rohit always stared at her in a way that made her feel naked, even if she was covered from top to bottom.

The office canteen didn't have quality food, and Rivanah knew she would have to get food from home. But she was done with the maid's dull stuff that her sister and her husband had developed a taste for. And cooking didn't interest her, or so she

thought, so it was out of question. While munching the somewhat stale burger in the canteen, she wondered about the message she had received asking her to learn to cook else the person would make her cry. *How audacious! Cook, my foot!* Out of sheer angst, she had deleted the message immediately after reading.

She knew that if the situation peaked to another level other than the messages, she would have to involve Ekansh and do something about it.

After she came to her desk post lunch, she found some fresh red roses waiting for her. She counted them: twelve. It was her birth date. She immediately called Ekansh.

'Thank you mister. You really caught me unprepared.'

'What are you saying?'

'The twelve roses.'

'Which roses?'

Rivanah was quiet for a moment. She looked at the roses and then heard him say, 'What are you talking about?' Ekansh genuinely sounded like he knew nothing about it.

'Oh, nothing. I was kidding,' she said feeling an irk brewing in her. She talked to him causally for another minute and then ended the call. Before she could hide the roses inside her desk drawer, her team lead, Sridhar, immediately asked, 'Hey, is it your birthday?' He was looking at her breasts.

'No,' she said picking up the roses without caring to look at him.

'Then? Boyfriend?'

Rivanah nodded with an uninterested smile and brought the roses close to her to inspect them. The fragrance was strong. She kept the entire bunch inside one of the drawers and resumed working. An hour later, Prateek pinged her on the office messenger:

Hi! You there?

At first Rivanah thought she would not reply. She was committed and there was no point giving air to the friendship that Prateek was covertly seeking since she was confident he would interpret her friendliness for love. Then another message popped up from him and she had to reply. If she didn't, she knew this passive wooing would continue.

Did you like the roses?

He knew she had a boyfriend so what was he doing sending her red roses? Did he believe she could still be lured? A sudden rage filled within her. She could have punched Prateek in the face if he was there in front of her. She took a deep breath, relaxed herself, and then typed on the messenger chat window:

Please meet me at the smoking zone NOW.

'I'll be back in a minute,' she told Sridhar and moved out of her cubicle.

The smoking zone was not an official smoking zone but an open extension to the office space where people would smoke and indulge in casual and sometimes—as the office lingo went—*tharki* talk. Prateek joined her after two minutes.

'I don't want to be rude Prateek, but you are not going to send me any more roses, okay?'

'Why? What happened? You don't like roses?' Prateek looked around nervously for once. There weren't many people around.

'I like a lot of things, but that doesn't mean you will gift the mall to me.'

'What's wrong with gifts?'

'Wrong? There's nothing right in it,' Rivanah said helplessly. 'I told you I have a boyfriend.'

'So? Just because you have a boyfriend doesn't mean I can't gift you something? I'm not asking you to leave him. I only sent you simple, harmless, and fresh smelling roses.'

‘I don’t appreciate all this,’ Rivanah said and dashed back to her place.

In the evening Prateek pinged her on the office messenger again.

I’m sorry, Rivanah. Don’t be angry with me.

Rivanah was talking to Ekansh on the phone when she saw the message. Once her phone call ended, she read the message again. She knew she couldn’t be too rude with him.

I’m not angry with you. And it’s okay. I’m happy you understood what I meant.

You are happy, I’m happy. So, coffee after office?

An irritated Rivanah logged out of the office messenger. While moving out of the office in the evening, she stopped by the office’s main gate. Prateek was standing there with two paper glasses of coffee.

‘What’s this, Prateek?’

‘Coffee. I asked you on the messenger and you...’

‘I logged out.’

‘Yes. So I thought you are okay with coffee. We can sit and have it in the office premises itself if you have a problem going out with me.’

The guy was slowly getting on her nerves now. She was all too glad she had rejected his proposal in school or else by now she would have either killed him or admitted herself to a mental asylum.

‘Okay, let’s have coffee.’ She wanted to be done with it. ‘But Prateek, you have to promise me something.’

‘Anything!’

‘You won’t do something for me unless I request you to do so.’

He gave her a long stare.

‘Say something,’ she urged.

‘I was waiting for you to request me to talk.’

‘Very funny! Come now.’ They stood at a corner inside the office premises with Prateek who kept talking endlessly while Rivanah did her best to sip off the hot coffee as quickly as she could. Finally, she took an autorickshaw and went home. On her way back, she tried calling Ekansh up but his line would always be busy. So she called one of her close friends from college, Pooja Haldar, who had been placed in a software MNC in Hyderabad. Pooja was the gossip queen of their batch and talking to her was always fun.

The autorickshaw dropped Rivanah right in front of Vishnu Dham. She walked in and took the elevator, still chirping on phone with Pooja. Once the elevator ascended, the call disconnected abruptly because there was no network reception. Rivanah was about to unplug her phone’s ear piece when the elevator suddenly stopped a little above the second floor. There was darkness inside the elevator. Rivanah tried but could see nothing

through the elevator gate either. She understood it had to be a power cut.

'Hello, anyone there? Hello?' Rivanah said raising her voice. Her eyes were slowly getting used to the dark but she could still see nothing except for the elevator switchboard. Suddenly she heard footsteps coming toward her. *The security guard*? she thought and said, 'Excuse me, I'm stuck here. Could you please get someone to turn on the generator?'

The footsteps stopped as a response. She thought the person might have gone looking for where the generator was. She waited impatiently, wiping the sweat drops off her forehead with her handkerchief. With every passing second she felt the elevator doors were closing in on her in the dark. Then there was a loud noise, as someone kicked the elevator gate hard. Rivanah shrieked out in fear.

‘Who is this?’ she said in a fragile tone. Nothing happened. Her short, jittery breath could now inhale a certain fragrance. She could tell it was a deodorant but didn’t know which one. She hastily tried switching on the flashlight of her phone. The moment she held it in front of the collapsible gate of the elevator, there was another kick on it. This one was stronger than the earlier one. A nervous Rivanah lost her grip on her phone and it fell.

‘Please don’t do this,’ she pleaded trying to bend down to retrieve her phone. Someone now held the elevator gate and shook it hard. Rivanah started shaking in fear and sweating profusely.

‘Please!’ she somehow muttered.

Silence. The power came on and the elevator started moving up again. Rivanah felt her muscles relaxing slowly. She tried to look through the gate but there was nobody. Instead, she noticed a white piece of cloth lying on the elevator floor. She picked it up. It was similar to the cloth she had

found in the cab on her first day in Mumbai. She flipped the cloth and found something stitched on it in black thread:

28 more days: learn to cook or learn to cry.

'What the fuck is this?' As the elevator stopped on her floor, she quickly opened the gates. She climbed down the stairs as fast as she could and went rushing to the security guard who was smoking by the building entrance.

'Bhaiya, did you see anyone enter or leave the building right now?'

'No. Why?'

'Were you here all the time?'

'I only went to switch on the generator madam. But the power is back now.'

'Why did you leave the gate?' she said rather annoyingly.

The security guard gave her an incredulous look and said, 'Who would switch on the generator then?'

Rivanah trotted back into the building, holding onto the piece of white cloth. This time she took the stairs to reach Meghna's third floor flat. When she reached, she saw that taped on the door was another piece of white cloth with words stitched in black:

Know your worth Mini.

6

'I received a message from a phone number identical to mine when I came to Mumbai.'

Rivanah was on Skype chat with Ekansh. Meghna and Aadil, for the first time since her arrival, had gone out together to one of Meghna's friend's wedding in Thane. And it was the right time for Rivanah to catch up with her boyfriend.

'What do you mean? Who is it?' Ekansh said, concerned, and thought for a moment before adding, 'Is this why you asked me about the duplicate SIM?'

'Uh-huh,' Rivanah nodded.

'What did the message say?'

Rivanah thought for a moment and said, ‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘It said something like get ready.’ She wanted to tell him about the elevator incident too but she could see how worried he already looked. She didn’t want him to skip office and fly down once again to Mumbai for something even she wasn’t sure about.

‘What? That’s absurd. Listen, why aren’t you getting a new local number?’

‘I have applied for a corporate connection. I’ll get it in a day or two. I will stop using the Kolkata number then.’

‘Just break that SIM card, okay?’

‘Okay.’

The call got disconnected, so Ekansh called her again.

‘Babu, will you like it if I cook for you?’ she said projecting a puppy-faced expression.

Ekansh came close to the cam and said, ‘Can you pinch yourself?’ He knew what a disaster she was in the kitchen and also how much she hated to cook. All her life she had only prepared a boiled egg. Once.

‘Dhat! Tell me honestly. Will you like it if I cook for you the next time we are together?’

‘Which guy won’t like it if his girl cooks for him? It’s a major turn-on for any average Indian guy.’

‘Is it? Why didn’t you tell me this before?’

‘I knew how much you hated cooking. But there’s no need to cook.’

‘Why?’

‘When we’ll be together, I don’t want you to waste time in the kitchen. I would rather want you to do something useful with me in the bedroom.’

‘You are incorrigible!’ she said and blushed.

‘Please don’t blush like that. I can’t afford a hard-on when I’m alone.’

‘Shut up!’ she said turning a darker shade of red. ‘I love you.’

At the back of her mind, the elevator incident had shaken her up a bit. She wanted to take the message seriously. But now, with Ekansh telling her it wasn’t important for him if she knew how to cook, the message and the sender stopped mattering. But she also promised herself that one more threatening incident and she would tell Ekansh everything honestly.

‘Hello!’ Ekansh said waving his hand and trying to break her trance. Rivanah was about to speak up when the doorbell rang. She immediately cut the Skype call, shut her laptop screen, and went to open the door. It was Meghna and Aadil. The latter was drunk and both were shouting at the top of their voices.

‘So what if I shook hands with him? I’m not sleeping with him like you do with your colleagues. Do you think I don’t know about it?’

Meghna said with a pitch that Rivanah was now somewhat used to.

'What happened di?' she asked with a dry throat. She had heard them fighting a couple of times more but this was the first time she had said something.

'Stay out of it, Mini,' Meghna roared and walked inside the bedroom. Aadil followed her. Rivanah shut the door quickly. Inside the bedroom, a two-hour long blame game began, with abuses galore. Rivanah thought there would begin a fist fight any moment but thankfully nothing of that sort happened. She couldn't sleep that night and kept exchanging messages with Ekansh over the phone. *It was one thing when an arranged marriage went wrong but when a love marriage goes flat like Meghna's and Aadil's,* Rivanah thought, *it makes the entire institution of marriage sound scary and loathsome.*

We will never fight, okay? she messaged Ekansh once the fight in the bedroom subsided.

Of course we won't. Fights happen when there's misunderstandings or if one takes the other for granted. We won't do either of the two, Ekansh responded.

I have seen Meghna di and Aadil da go against the entire family for their love and now they are fighting with each other all the time. Where's that love that made them leave their family?

Relationships do change with time dear, Ekansh messaged back.

I know and that's why I'm scared. Please don't ever change, Ekansh. I won't be able to take it. I love you too much.

I love you too much as well.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the only night that Meghna and Aadil fought. Almost every alternate day they would end up fighting over trivial issues but the accusations were serious and most of the time forthright cheap. Soon Rivanah concluded that perhaps both Meghna and Aadil knew the

relationship was over but were too afraid to acknowledge it because they were each other's choice to begin with. Rivanah shared her conclusion with Ekansh one night after installing Whatsapp on her new local phone number.

I agree, replied Ekansh.

Maybe neither wants to take the blame for the break up since they both are to be blamed for the relationship anyway.

Jesus. What happened to you? You suddenly sound so mature!

Rivanah sent him an angel's emoticon.

On a serious note Ekansh, their fights are simply getting on my nerves now.

It wasn't only her cousin and her husband who were getting to her. The office had seemed exciting at first, but within a fortnight, the thought of going to office and working in the cubicle where she had to grind herself all day made her cringe. At night she came home feeling weak and exhausted. The

food cooked by the maid was so repulsive that many a times she skipped dinner or simply drank a glass of milk and slept. Weekends were worse. Ekansh was in Bengaluru while she had no friends to hang out with in Mumbai. Prateek was there but she kept avoiding him, citing one excuse or the other. If she stayed back at home, there was her sister and brother-in-law to make life miserable for her. She preferred to sleep than join them for a movie or dinner outside because she knew peace would eventually be a far cry with them around. Once, during a dinner at a restaurant, Aadil ended up fighting with the waiter only because his idea of a Peking Soup was different from what the restaurant served him. When Meghna tried to calm him down, the fight steered direction ruining the evening all together.

On the second last Saturday of the month, Rivanah woke up late in the evening with hunger cramming her stomach. She opened the refrigerator

but there was nothing to eat. She called Meghna who told her she was in a movie theatre with a friend and would be late. She also informed her that the cook had taken a day off. The late relaying of information angered Rivanah but she didn't say much. She called the Borivali Biryani Centre and ordered a Chicken Tikka Biryani for herself. It was only after she had ordered the biryani that she realized she had run out of cash. She changed quickly and went out to the ATM across Vishnu Dham. She took out the cash, tore the receipt slip, threw it in the dustbin, and turned to go back to the flat when she noticed a piece of white cloth taped on the glass of the ATM's door from outside. It wasn't there when she entered.

'Dammit!' she muttered removing the tape on the cloth.

7 days more. It was stitched on it with black thread.

Rivanah looked around crushing the cloth in her grasp and exclaimed loudly, ‘Fuck you!’

Few passers-by gave her a what’s-wrong-with-you glance and then forgot about it.

7

Rivanah was sitting alone in the office cafeteria, during one of her monotonous days, tossing the fruits in her bowl when Prateek approached her.

'May I please join you?' He said it with such politeness that Rivanah couldn't say no. All these days Prateek had maintained a distance even though she knew he was keeping an eye on her.

Prateek thanked her and sat opposite her with his plate of masala idli and a paper-glass of filter coffee.

'Please don't scold me, but these past few days I have been noticing you looking pensive and disturbed about something. Is everything all right?'

So he was noticing me, after all! Rivanah thought and looked at him. If both of them didn't have a history in school and he was a tad less psychotic like he was in that moment, she would have found him cute.

'Anything troubling you?' he asked with genuine concern.

She wasn't sure if she could trust him with any personal information.

'You can tell me,' he said grasping her hand. The psycho Prateek was back. Rivanah instantly pulled her hand back and said, 'It's just that I'm finding it difficult to live with my cousin and her husband.'

'Why, what happened? Aren't they good people?'

'They are but I think they need space and more privacy which they don't get with me around.' Rivanah lied on purpose.

'Hmm.' He cut a piece of the Idli, dipped it in sambar, and put it in his mouth.

‘Why don’t you shift home?’ he suggested.

It did occur to her to shift to some PG but when she told her parents about it, they vehemently opposed it saying staying alone with unknown people wasn’t safe. Though Rivanah wasn’t convinced, she agreed only since she didn’t want the trouble that comes with shifting houses.

‘It’s too much of trouble,’ she lamented to Prateek.

‘I agree, but when you have a true friend, you don’t have to worry about it.’ It was the mild Prateek again.

Rivanah had to take a decision within seconds; yes or no. If she said yes, Prateek would invariably tell her he would take care of her shift and if she said no, then she would have to go back home—day after day—and try to adjust with her volatile cousin and her maniacal husband which she knew had tested her patience to the hilt already.

‘Can you really help me?’

‘Of course! All you need to do is check the availability of flats on sulekha.com or magicbricks.com. You can also check certain Facebook pages for availability.’

It sounded easy. It also meant she wouldn’t have to work as hard as she thought earlier.

Once home, she called Ekansh and discussed her plans of moving out with him.

‘Wow! The next time I’m there, we shall stay all alone.’

‘I’ll have roommates hon.’

‘We shall lock them out.’

After the nod from Ekansh, she logged into the websites Prateek had told her about, posted her requirement on one of the ‘Flat for rent in Mumbai’ Facebook pages and shortlisted five places in Goregaon and Malad that were reasonably close to her office and within her budget. She called on the phone numbers listed in the advertisement on the websites and got a favourable reply from some,

deciding to check out the places for herself the coming weekend. The next day when Prateek asked her if she had zeroed in on any place, she said, 'Few of them. I'm thinking of checking them out this weekend.'

'Wonderful. I'll be there with you. You shouldn't go around alone.'

Rivanah didn't say no because she indeed was sceptical of visiting the places alone and had hoped that Prateek would come forward to help her on his own. She responded with a smile of acknowledgement. By Sunday evening, Rivanah was sure where she was going to shift: Sai Baba Apartment in Malad west. The agent informed her that she would share the fully furnished flat with two other girls. When she told Meghna about her shift, Meghna didn't ask her the reason for leaving and instead apologized to her.

'Please don't apologize Meghna di. You let me stay here for so long. I should thank you actually.'

Meghna smiled at her, the first time she had done so since Rivanah moved in. They were boiling milk in the kitchen to prepare some coffee for themselves.

'But you have to do me one last favour, Meghna di,' Rivanah said.

'Tell me.'

'Please talk to mumma and baba. They'll never support my shifting,' Rivanah pleaded.

'Don't worry. I'll talk to them,' Meghna said caressing her cheeks. Rivanah hugged her tight.

'Can I ask you something di?' she said breaking the hug.

'Sure.'

'Were you sure you loved Aadil da when you married him?'

Looking into her eyes, Meghna tried to decipher the reason for the query. 'Completely,' she said after an instant.

'And what do you think now?'

‘I think love is complicated. It doesn’t let you leave your partner alone when you actually should and it makes you own him when you really should not.’

‘Does marriage change a relationship, di?’

‘It’s not about marriage. It’s about time. Dating and all is fine, but when you start living with someone twenty-four-seven it sure does test one’s true feelings for the other. Also, how you handle monotony in a relationship says a lot about how you basically feel for the other person. Not every couple fights like we do. Moreover, Aadil and I were too young when we married, so all of it seemed like a magic carpet back then but now we know our relationship is nothing but a dirty doormat.’

Rivanah sensed remorse in the last sentence.

‘I love someone di. He works in Bangalore. We are college friends.’

‘I know.’

Rivanah's facial muscles tightened hoping she didn't hear the phone sex sessions she had with Ekansh.

'Don't worry, nobody will know,' Meghna assured her. Rivanah gave her a tight, awkward smile.

'Do you guys want to get married?' Meghna poured the boiled milk in the two cups containing coffee powder.

'We do. Not immediately but we definitely want to get married. But I'm always scared what if something bad happens and I can't marry him? It's not good to be so emotionally dependent on someone, is it di?'

'Why not, especially if both of your eally love each other?' Meghna said stirring the cups with a spoon.

'Hmm.'

The following Saturday, Rivanah shifted to the furnished two bedroom flat in Malad west. Though Prateek offered his help, she turned him down politely because she didn't have much luggage. It was Aadil who drove her to the flat. This was the only time she was alone with him. During her time in Vishnu Dham, she had always spoken to Aadil in Meghna's presence. He seemed to be a person who took his own sweet time to open up. So far she had not understood what he was really like.

The elevator was undergoing maintenance when she arrived with her luggage at Sai Baba Apartments. The flat was on the second floor so she didn't have much trouble climbing up. Rivanah pressed the doorbell of her new flat and waited. Someone opened the door for her and said with a straight face, 'Welcome Mini.'

Rivanah wasn't prepared for this.

8

By Mumbai's standard it was a rather spacious flat. While Rivanah got the drawing room, the other two girls—Ishita Rana and Asha Pradhan—took a room each. Both girls seemed to belong to different planets. Rivanah instantly took a liking to Ishita even though she did not have a lot in common with her. Ishita was fiercely independent and audaciously modern. She consumed an average of a box of cigarettes a day and all her water bottles contained 80 percent Vodka and 20 percent Sprite. Ishita worked in a travel company and would turn up in her office half-drunk saying she couldn't focus unless she tasted Vodka. Though she

hailed from a small place—Pathankot—she could give any big city girl a run for their money. She was debonair, sharp, and a fashion freak. She had six tattoos and two piercings on her body. There were people who merely exist and then there were people who lived, Rivanah observed, but Ishita seemed to fly through her life with no attachment, no care, and absolutely no plan.

'People judge the unknown with their knowledge of the known. I take up the unknown head-on because the known is so damn boring,' Ishita told her ten minutes after their first meet. Rivanah didn't exactly know what she meant but understood probably it only meant she loved to live without any rules of the society.

Asha Pradhan, on the other hand, was someone who was acutely secretive. She cooked her own food even though Ishita and Rivanah had opted for a cook. Neither knew where she actually worked or hailed from. She was out before the two woke

up in the morning and when she returned in the evening, she kept herself locked up in her room. When Rivanah came to the flat for the first time and Asha referred to her as 'Mini', Rivanah had asked her how she knew her nickname.

'I looked at your profile on Facebook. A comment on one of your cover pictures had that name. I always have to know everything about my flatmate.'

But you share nothing about yourself, Rivanah thought. She wouldn't have been surprised if one day someone told her that Asha was part of some occult group who were perhaps conspiring to bring the devil into the world.

In fact, one night, when Rivanah found the door to Asha's room slightly ajar, she peeped in to take a look out of curiosity. She saw her surrounded by candles sitting in a vajrasana pose in the centre of her room with a towel wrapped around her bosom

and her dishevelled hair covering her face. She maintained a distance from her since then.

While Rivanah secretly admired the free bird that Ishita was, the latter became protective of her because she knew Rivanah hadn't seen life as one should in order to stop taking it seriously. Rivanah had got a non-judgemental friend in the form of Ishita while the latter had got a soul-sister in the former. Within a few weeks, the girls bonded deeply.

One Friday, after Rivanah was done with her dinner, she saw Ishita dressed up like a sexy doll in a short yellow dress and matching stilettos.

'Where are you going?' Rivanah asked.

'Hype, Bandra,' Ishita quipped clicking a selfie with a pout standing in front of the wardrobe mirror in Rivanah's room.

'Shopping?'

'Bleh!' she said. 'It's a nightclub, yaar. And listen, I may not come back tonight so don't panic.

Sleep in my room and keep the door locked. I don't trust this Asha, okay? For all you know, she may be a despo lesbo!'

'Alright, but where will you be for the whole night?'

'Wherever my boyfriend takes me.'

'I never knew you had one.' Rivanah's surprise was genuine.

'One? Excuse me, I have two healthy ones,' Ishita said adjusting her breasts with her eyes fixed on the mirror.

'I meant boyfriend!'

'Lol. I know. But then I myself didn't know I had one till a night before. Connected with him on Facebook.'

'And you love him?'

'Love?' She turned around to look at Rivanah as if she said something blasphemous. 'Who said anything about love?'

‘Do you mean you are going to have a one-night stand?’ Rivanah said in shock. Ishita laughed out.

‘God! You sound so terrorized! Yes, I do mean exactly that; a one-fucking-night-stand.’

‘It’s not worth it.’ Rivanah couldn’t believe how quickly she had turned judgemental of her roomie.

‘Oh-ho, someone’s experienced, huh!’ Ishita teased her.

‘Shut up! I have a boyfriend. And I’m loyal to him. I hate one-night stands anyway.’

‘You hate something you haven’t even tried yet. That’s why I say society is such a bitch. It prepares us to have an opinion about something we have no clue about.’

‘I hate it and that’s why I never had it.’

‘Well, to each his own. Can I borrow your perfume darling?’ Ishita asked after she was done honing herself in the mirror.

‘Yeah, okay.’ Rivanah opened the wardrobe and gave her the perfume. Ishita applied it quickly and

left.

Ekansh had a night shift that night, hence he wasn't available on phone. Asha didn't turn up that night either, so Rivanah slept in the drawing room with the lights on. In the morning, she woke up with a strong urge to pee. Still sleepy-eyed, she went to the bathroom to relieve herself. She opened the door of the bathroom and saw a butt-naked guy standing with his back to her and peeing. She let out a loud scream and scampered to Ishita's room.

'Ishu wake up! There's a naked man in our flat.'

Ishita didn't budge a bit.

'Ishu!' She shook her hard.

Ishita turned to look at her drowsily. 'He didn't have a place to go to. I brought him here,' said Ishita casually and flipped the other way.

'Is he retarded? Doesn't he know how to shut a door and pee?' The sight had truly robbed Rivanah off her sleep.

'Ask him,' Ishita said and closed her eyes. The guy peeped inside the room. Rivanah shut her eyes tight.

'Sorry. My underwear is lying beside you. Could you please...' he said.

Rivanah opened one of her eyes, picked up the underwear in disgust with the tip of her fingers, and threw it at him. When the underwear clad guy came into the room, Rivanah stood up, turned around, and with her back to the guy slowly moved outside. It was for the first time she had seen a stark naked guy that close. The image stayed with her. Later in the morning she shared the incident with Ekansh.

'Ishita brought home a guy last night,' she told him over phone.

'Is she mad or what? Doesn't she know there are two more girls living with her?'

'It's okay. The guy had nowhere to go so...'

‘It’s not okay. Ask your roomie not to repeat it again or else you would complain to the landlord. Alright?’

Rivanah was quiet. She thought she would tell Ekansh how funny it was to see a butt-naked guy but she decided to omit it lest he ended up asking her to shift some place else immediately.

‘Alright?’ Ekansh repeated.

‘Alright.’

Rivanah agreed with Ekansh but she couldn’t confront Ishita about it. Somewhere deep within her, Rivanah felt Ishita did what she herself wished to do but couldn’t: going to nightclubs, dating guys on a hunch without emotional attachment, living a carefree life with nobody to question. She remembered how at the end of every term-exam in school students were provided with report cards. As an adult too she carried a report card for every action of hers. If she went to a nightclub, she knew, her parents and Ekansh would fail her. Of course

she could have gone without telling anybody but that was something she wasn't prepared to do. Or trained to do. Even if it was talking to a boy during her teenage years, her parents had to know who exactly the boy was and what his parents did and where they lived. Coming from that kind of a life and now looking at Ishita, she only could adore her. Rivanah knew she would never be able to approach the edge on which Ishita lived her life. It wasn't that she wanted to make that edge her life but she did miss the kind of freedom which allowed one to do as his or her heart said. Maybe if she was given the freedom, she wouldn't have gone to pick up guys at random but that freedom, that right to live the way she wanted was what she coveted. More so after knowing Ishita.

Rivanah did try once to talk about it with Ekansh telling him that she too wanted to go to a nightclub, but he came down on her in a way she didn't expect him to.

‘Promise me you aren’t going to a nightclub. I’ll take you when I’m in Mumbai or when you come to Bangalore.’

‘Will it make you insecure if I go there alone or with friends?’

‘Shut up, it’s not about me. It’s not safe to go there alone.’

‘I won’t go alone. And not everyone who goes to a nightclub gets brutalized. Even you go but I didn’t say anything ever.’

‘I’m a guy. Do you have any idea what you are saying?’

That was the end of the discussion. She didn’t like the chauvinist streak in Ekansh. It was something which was there in her father too. Whenever she wore a dress which was slightly bold, her father made sure to complain about the younger generation’s dressing sense. It disgusted her but in the end she consoled herself saying perhaps her father and Ekansh were right—that it

wasn't a safe place for girls. But she also knew the fuzz that made life all the more attractive was beyond that line of safety. Every time Ishita showed her the selfies she clicked at pubs and nightclubs, Rivanah would get upset. Soon an opportunity arrived when Ishita came home with two passes to a show one Saturday night.

'Darling, I have passes for DJ Notti tonight. Get dressed up doll, together we shall fall!' Ishita said in a rapper's tone.

'Sorry, I can't,' a gloomy Rivanah said.

'Can't? Why?' Ishita couldn't believe someone was saying no to her favourite DJ.

'If my parents or my boyfriend found out about it, I'd be screwed!'

Ishita ogled at her for some time and then said, 'Are you someone's pet?'

'It's not about being a pet. I love them and I'm only respecting their wishes.'

Ishita didn't argue any further since she felt it was pointless doing so. Later that night she Whatsapped Rivanah a snap of hers snuggling up with DJ Notti. She was about to delete the snap when she heard a sudden noise. It was too near to have happened outside her flat. She sat up on her bed trying to listen hard. A few seconds later, she heard it again. It sounded like a moan. Rivanah moistened her dry lips feeling a tiny bubble of fear form in her gut. She had fallen asleep in Ishita's room for a change after talking to Ekansh on the phone. The door of the room was open. And worse was she had watched a horror film with Ishita the night before. All her mind could conjure was a headless figure scampering up to her with a dagger. Her heartbeats gained speed in no time. She didn't know why but she was anticipating a sound in the stillness of the night. Something fell somewhere in the flat. *Had someone broken in?* She could feel small beads of perspiration started forming on her

forehead and her throat started going dry. She called out, ‘Asha!’

Rivanah wasn’t even sure if Asha had come home or not. There was no response. She stood up and sneaked toward the switchboard.

‘Shit!’ she said pressing the switch. There was a power cut. Or...had someone cut the power off? She swore she would never watch horror films again. She took her phone and dialled Ishita’s number. Nobody picked up. She dialled Ekansh. It was switched off. She wanted to call her parents but didn’t want to disturb them at that hour. She checked her mobile phone’s clock: 2:15 am. Even if her parents’ phone gets a missed call from her at this time, they would go paranoid. She dialled Pooja’s number. Call waiting. What else was she expecting for someone who had made a new boyfriend? Another noise tore apart the dreadful silence. This time she was sure it came from the toilet. The mug must have toppled...but why? She

inched toward the window and stood still, prepared to scream her lungs out if she saw something…anything. An hour went by—neither anyone appeared nor any sound came. The strength in her legs were wearing out. It was a Saturday—the only day in the whole week where she could afford to sleep till late in the morning—but for this stupid sound she couldn't go to her bed either. She was about to sit down on the floor when she heard a meow. She shone her phone's flashlight toward the door. Another meow. Rivanah feared all kinds of pets; especially cats. If it was really a cat that had come in—from God knows where—then it would not go away easily. She peeped outside the window and saw lights in the nearby apartments. *The power is probably back* she thought. It gave her an impetus to stand up and amble toward the room's switchboard. She pressed the switch and the tube light was on within few seconds. She stepped outside the room swallowing a lump and

peeked inside the adjacent toilet. Rivanah noticed the small bucket was on the floor along with the jet spray. Also, on top of the flush tank sat a pitch black cat. The way it looked at her made her swallow multiple lumps together. The toilet window was open. *It has to be Asha,* she wondered, *who always leaves it open*. Rivanah noticed that around the cat's neck was a red ribbon which had a white piece of cloth at its centre. The kind she had been receiving for some time now. Rivanah guessed the obvious. She was too scared to go near the cat so she took couple of steps and switched on the toilet's light. She strained her eyes to read:

Fear is the most prized illusion that we create for ourselves.

The cat suddenly flipped and jumped out of the toilet window. Rivanah stepped back with her heart in her mouth. As she relaxed, she found a rage gripping her. She dashed to the toilet window

and screamed, ‘You don’t scare me. You can’t scare me, alright!’ Except for a few stray dogs that started to bark, there was nobody else. She calmed down and went to her room where her phone buzzed with a message:

Time’s up, Mini. Be ready to cry.

The message this time came from an unknown phone number. She called back but it was switched off.

‘Even I want to see how you are going to make me cry,’ she told her stubborn self and then saved the unknown number by the name of ‘Stranger’.

9

Rivanah unlocked her flat's door and came in. Instantly a rotten smell hit her. She pinched her nose but could see nothing because it was all dark. She kept the main door open to allow some light from the passage into the room as she went toward the switchboard. Before Rivanah could reach it, the door shut with a loud bang. She turned in a flash and felt trapped in the darkness. She took a few steps to reach the switchboard but felt something around her neck. She touched it with her hands and realized to her shock that it was someone's feet. She wanted to scream but found she had lost her voice. She ran to the main door but

couldn't open it. There was a chuckle in the air and she saw herself hanging by the drawing room's ceiling fan. The eyes seemed demonic while the chuckle was vibrating in her eardrums. As she started losing her sense, she heard a rather familiar sound. It was a Skype video call waiting to be answered. Rivanah opened her eyes wide with a jerk on her bed and took some time to understand what was happening. *Yet again the same dream*, she thought, and hastily took the Skype call on the laptop kept beside her.

'What happened? You look messy,' Ekansh said appearing on her laptop screen.

'Nothing. I just dozed off waiting for your call,' she said tying her hair in a bun and regaining her balance.

'I really miss you a lot, Ekansh, especially when Ishita tells me about her escapades,' Rivanah said. 'We have to be in the same city soon otherwise I'll go mad.'

‘Why don’t you tell me straightaway that you want to make love to me?’ He was trying to cheer her up.

‘Shut up. I only want to be with you.’

‘Really?’ Ekansh said with amusement.

‘Yes, really. Long distance is a killer.’ She sounded acutely emotional. Ekansh turned serious too and said, ‘Bring your forehead close to the cam.’

She did and he planted a kiss on his cam.

‘I know long distance is a bit trying, but if we can pass this, it will be so good for our relationship,’ he said.

‘Hmm. I was wondering that my shift to Bangalore is a far fetched thing as of now. Why don’t you shift to Mumbai instead?’

‘Do you think I’m not trying? But the platform I work in isn’t there in the Mumbai office of ours. But still I’m on the lookout. I would grab a change

of location on the first opportunity. You wouldn't have to tell me.'

'I know I don't have to. But...you know you shouldn't have come here last time.'

'Why do you say that?'

'I have started to miss you all the more now. I had accepted our long distance relationship when I was at home but ever since you came to Mumbai, a weird kind of restlessness has invaded me. Also, this stupid loneliness is making me crazy.'

'Why, where are your roomies?'

'Ishita has gone to her hometown to attend a cousin's wedding.'

'And the other one?'

'I have no clue about Asha. All I know is she hasn't come home on weekends since the last two weeks.'

'Is she a ghost?'

'Don't scare me, Ekansh. I stay alone here. Moreover, I have been having this recurrent dream

which is really scary.'

'What dream?'

'That I'm hanging from a ceiling fan. I have seen it like four-five times now in the last few months. Only the location changes but rest of it is all same.'

'I'm sorry.' He blew a flying-kiss to her via the laptop screen. She kissed him back.

'Even I'm lonely here,' he said dejectedly. 'I mean I have friends here but you know what I mean.'

'I do. How I wish you were here with me right now.'

'What if I fly down to Mumbai?' Ekansh said in a tone which meant business.

'When? Tell me before hand so that I can take an off from office.'

'Now dumbo! What if I come down tonight?'

'OMG! Really Ekansh?'

'Wait and watch.'

The Skype call was abruptly disconnected. It was 8:15 pm. At exactly 3:20 am Ekansh pressed the doorbell of Rivanah's flat in Malad.

'I don't believe this!' she said opening the door. Ekansh came in and kicked the door with his heel. Then he cupped Rivanah's face and smooched her deeply. She could feel his hunger in the ferocious way his tongue explored her mouth.

'I don't want you to stop us tonight,' he said in a whisper breaking the smooch as he took off her top. The urgency in his voice and his demeanour was supremely sexy. They had always discussed it amongst themselves; no penetrative sex before marriage. But that was when they hadn't stayed away from the other for this long. They hadn't realized the urge for an emotional union through a physical communion could be this necessary.

'I won't Ekansh. I won't stop you,' she responded with another whisper as she got rid of his shirt. She had seen him topless but he had never

seen her in a bra. He groped her breasts over her bra and squeezed them hard. Then his hands went behind and unhooked the bra.

'How do you open this stupid strap?' he gasped. Rivanah managed a short giggle and unhooked the bra looking naughtily at him. Once the bra came off, her instinct was to cover her breasts with her hand while Ekansh pushed her against a wall and pinned both her hands apart on the wall. Her firm succulent breasts were right in front of him in all its nudity.

'Ekansh, leave me,' she said out of shyness closing her eyes.

'I will but first look at me.'

Helpless, Rivanah opened her eyes only to find him staring at her. Looking directly at her, Ekansh dived down a bit and took her left nipple in his mouth, sucking it gently at first and then hard to the extent that Rivanah cried out in pleasure.

‘You are so loud,’ he said leaving her left nipple and shifting focus to the right one.

‘Shut me up then.’ The way she said it compelled Ekansh to smooch her once again, this time mauling her breasts with his grasp. She unbuckled his belt and unzipped the jeans he was wearing. Her hands slipped inside his underwear and grabbed his penis.

Ekansh broke the smooch and looked deep into her eyes.

‘It is so hard.’ She seemed bewildered.

‘Now you know what you do to me when I miss you.’

His hands untied her pyjama and tugged them down till her knees along with her panty. She hurriedly stepped out of both. He put his hands on her vagina, with the tip of his middle finger just about entering it. A moan escaped her as she grabbed his hand.

‘You are so wet,’ he exclaimed.

‘Now you know what you do to me when I miss you,’ she said jerking her head a bit to let her hair fall sideways to her face.

‘Rivanah Bannerjee, I want to make love to you. Right now,’ he said coming out of his shoes and socks. His eyes were set ablaze with a lusty fire whose flame was love.

‘Stop talking, start doing me,’ she gasped.

Ekansh picked her up in his lap and took her to Ishita’s room, where he threw her on the bed and got on top of her. They kissed while he tried to insert his penis inside her vagina with one hand.

‘Slowly Ekansh. It is hurting me,’ she said spreading her legs as wide as she could while holding onto him tight.

And before she knew it, her virginity was gone. The love of her life became one with her. She could have cried at that moment as she felt Ekansh’s penis slowly make its way inside the tight and juicy walls of her vagina and then thrusting his

pelvis against hers. Rivanah closed in her legs around his hips, rubbing his butt cheeks with her heel and clawing his back with her nails while kissing him each time the thrusts brought him close to her face.

Since adolescence, Rivanah had fancied about the moment she would become someone's the way it has been designed by the cosmos. She only prayed that whenever it happened,the body in the whole process would be a means for her to surrender her heart and soul to that someone. Making love to Ekansh was an oblation from her side to the holy idol that they had both created and named 'love'. He soon took her legs over his shoulder, bending her a bit and penetrating even deeper. His thrusts turned harder and faster now. She held his arm and dug her nails into the flesh of his arm. In the heart of this pain, there was a pleasure which each thrust was connecting her to. Each time his penis rubbed her vaginal walls, it

felt like some forbidden waves were eating away the shores of morality; bit by bit. Soon his body went stiff. He gave three full and deep thrusts, one after the other, and then remained rock still. A prolonged groan escaped Ekansh's lips as she felt a warm discharge flood her vagina. He collapsed beside her. She could feel an ache in her hip bones as she brought her legs together. They lay still for some time. Next, she slowly cuddled into his arms.

'It was awesome,' he said.

'Sshhh.' She put a finger on his lips and said, 'Just feel it.'

He kissed her finger and they lay awake naked in the quietude of the dissolving night.

It was one in the afternoon when Rivanah woke up the next day. She felt sticky in the warm morning sun rays that were falling on her. They had forgotten to switch on the fan last night. Ekansh was still asleep. She sat up arranging her hair in a bun. She climbed down the bed, naked, and went to

her room where she checked out this new non-virgin self in the full-length wardrobe mirror. There weren't any external changes except for a few bite marks around her breasts but she knew she had taken a leap last night. She had never been so happy in her life and so sure of her commitment before.

Ekansh stayed over the whole of Sunday as well since none of the flatmates returned. They made love again in the evening but it was less intense and more sensual.

'Last night was a dream,' she said sipping a hot cup of coffee with Ekansh sitting in front of the French window of her flat wrapped in a bed sheet wearing only their inners. They had only one coffee cup from which they were alternating their sips.

'I swear it was,' Ekansh said.

'What if I get pregnant now?' Rivanah said looking up at him.

‘Huh?’

‘I’m in my unsafe time of the month. It’s quite possible.’

Ekansh caressed her forehead and said with a warm smile, ‘Then I would marry you this very moment.’

She kissed his chin feeling emotional. They continued to sit in silence. She wanted to tell him about the messages she had been receiving since her arrival in Mumbai but she felt the time they spent was too beautiful to even bring up a morbid subject like that.

The next hour Ekansh left for Bengaluru. Rivanah was passing time by surfing her Facebook profile on her laptop when her phone buzzed with a message.

Coming Saturday, Cafe Basilico, Bandra. 8:30 pm. Meet me.

Though it was from another unknown phone number, Rivanah knew only one person could have

sent it. The Stranger.

10

'Come on!' said Bijoy. He was one of Rivanah's teammates in office.

'Where to?' Rivanah asked.

'It's your boyfriend's cake cutting time,' said Shantanu. The two guys giggled among themselves and went ahead. A confused Rivanah put her desk computer on sleep mode and followed them wondering what they were talking about.

They went to the HR department's room where there was already a large assemblage of people. As Rivanah entered, everyone looked at her as if she was star of the occasion and they were waiting

for her arrival. She had no clue what was going on. There was concealed laughter and a few nudges.

'Let her come in the front,' one of the HR personnel said from amidst the crowd. Everyone made space for her to come to the front. Rivanah ambled to the centre of the whole hoopla and saw Prateek wearing a designer birthday paper cap, holding a plastic knife, and standing behind a desk with a chocolate cake on top of it.

'I was waiting for you,' Prateek said with a grin.

Rivanah felt like a fool. Everyone started clapping and singing the birthday song as Prateek sliced out a piece of the cake and offered it to Rivanah. With everyone around staring at them, she couldn't refuse and reluctantly allowed Prateek to stuff the piece of cake in her mouth. Someone captured the moment on his camera phone. As the two moved aside, everyone else jumped on the cake. Some ate it while others smeared the cream on Prateek's face. Rivanah slowly severed herself

from the crowd and stood at a corner in the room waiting for Prateek to be free. So this is what Prateek had been up to all along! Labelling her as his girlfriend to all his colleagues.

A few minutes later, when Prateek went toward the washroom to clean his cake smeared face, Rivanah caught hold of him.

'Did you tell people you are my boyfriend?' She sounded livid.

'No! Why would I?' Prateek feigned innocence.

'Then why would my teammates tag you as my boyfriend?'

A moment later Prateek slowly hanged his head down in guilt.

'Why would you do such a stupid thing Prateek?'

'I love you Rivanah.'

There! He knew next to nothing about her but he loved her. *When will men stop interpreting attraction as love,* she thought and said, 'Does that

mean you will go around telling people we are a couple? Did I ever tell you that I love you too?'

'I didn't know it will reach your ears.' He was still staring at the floor.

Rivanah's jaws dropped. She understood she was talking to a crazy person with whom one couldn't talk sense. Did he really think the rumour won't reach her and if it did, would compel her to make him her boyfriend? And all this after knowing well enough that she was committed. Zero tolerance was the only way of keeping this lunatic off her, she decided.

'I want you to go and announce it in front of all your colleagues that you are not my boyfriend.'

'Please Rivanah.' Prateek looked up at her pleadingly. 'They will make fun of me.'

'I don't care! And you deserve it if they do so.'

'I'm sorry Rivanah.'Prateek collapsed on her feet. 'Please forgive me.'

It made her feel awkward: an HR person from her office pleading to her by touching her feet. It can't get more absurd than that. This guy *was* a psycho. Period.

'Get up Prateek. What nonsense is this? Don't make a scene now.' She tried walking away but Prateek refused to leave her. Another employee came in and stopped when he saw his HR on his knees in front of a junior.

'Forgive me please,' Prateek pleaded.

'Yes, okay,' Rivanah somehow managed to say and sauntered away uncomfortably.

Prateek stood up and smiled at the employee who was looking at him aghast.

'One has to plead mercy when your girlfriend is angry,' Prateek said with a smile. The employee shot him an acknowledging smile before entering the washroom.

Later that evening, Rivanah shared the incident with Ekansh on the phone.

‘I just don’t get it. I have told him clearly that I’m committed and yet he keeps pursuing me.’

‘Then all you need to do is lodge a complaint with the authorities. This is a kind of passive harassment,’ Ekansh remarked.

‘Hmm. I will if he repeats it again.’

From the next day onward, thankfully, she saw Prateek maintaining a distance as he had been doing before. She was relieved. But it only lasted till the Friday evening of that week.

‘I know I did a bad thing. May I make it up to you with a nice dinner tomorrow? It’s Saturday after all,’ he asked. They were alone in the office elevator.

‘It’s okay Prateek. As long as you don’t repeat what you did, it is okay. And sorry, I can’t come. I’m busy tomorrow.’

‘Boyfriend?’ he asked.

None of your business, she wanted to tell him.

‘Yes.’

She saw his face go pale.

'Is he coming to Mumbai?'

God, his questions never end! 'Yes,' replied.

'Great. How is he coming—train or flight? Let's go and fetch him together?'

Why can't I kill this person? RIGHT NOW.

Rivanah feigned a fake call and excused herself.

It wasn't her boyfriend she was supposed to meet on Saturday. She had planned to meet the stranger—someone she knew nothing about. But somehow she kept getting the feeling that the stranger knew a lot about her. Who was this person? Someone she knew? She was itching to share this with Ekansh but she knew he wouldn't take it well and would refrain her from meeting the person. She promised herself she would tell him everything once she met the stranger.

On Saturday morning, Rivanah was reading the newspaper when she came across a report about a young techie's brutal murder in Bhandup by an

unidentified person. *What if this stranger is a serial killer?* she thought and freaked. As Ishita walked into the room with her cup of green tea, Rivanah finally decided to share the whole story with her. Ishita listened to her patiently and said, 'So, this person wants to meet you because you didn't cook the three dishes he asked you to, even after he gave you a month's time?'

'It's not that simple. I told you one of the messages said I would be crying soon.'

'Confusing indeed but intriguing nevertheless.' A naughty smile appeared on Ishita's face. 'I so love mystery men. What if he looks like Ian Somerhalder?'

'Ishu Please! I'm not in the mood for this.'

Ishita seemed pensive for some time and then jumped up, clapping her hands in excitement.

'Wow, you have a secret admirer daring! You know secret admirers are awesome in bed because day and night they only think about fucking you and

when they finally get hold of you, they don't let you go. Don't you remember SRK from the movie *Darr*? That K...K...K...Kiran thing was so damn sexy!'

'Come on, I'm not going to fuck him. I only want to know who the hell this person is and why he is leaving messages for me. And I'm not sure if he is an admirer or not.'

'Trust me he is one. This crying business is all a farce. He said so to gain your attention. Now that he has your attention, he wants to meet up. And I'm so damn sure he'll be hot looking.'

'How are you so sure?'

'Gut instinct. Tell Ekansh he has some competition now.'

'Shut up! If I tell him about this person, he will ask me not to meet him.'

'Oh yes. And once he tells you something, you will have to obey it, right my Bhartiya nari?'

‘Whatever! But I’m a little scared too. What if he is some creep or a killer or something?’

‘But it isn’t a secluded house or a garage that he has asked you to meet him at. It’s very much a public place. So don’t worry. I have been to Cafe Basilico before so I’ll go with you,’ Ishita said.

‘Thanks sis,’ Rivanah said giving her a relived smile.

‘But if he turns out to be someone really hot, he is mine then, okay? You can have him only when I’m done. Deal?’

‘Oh please! You can keep him for all I care. But what if he doesn’t meet me if he sees you with me?’

‘He won’t know we are together,’ Ishita winked at her.

Rivanah reached Cafe Basilico in Bandra on time. She had stepped down at the Bandra station along with Ishita but they took two separate autorickshaws to reach the restaurant. The guard

outside asked her name and immediately took Rivanah to a table reserved for her. The cafe had both an outside seating arrangement as well as an air-conditioned area inside. The waiter took Rivanah to a table which was in the open. She made herself comfortable, looking around to see if she knew anyone there. Ishita came in minutes later and sat by a table opposite her. Minutes passed but nobody approached her. The stranger had asked her to meet at 8:30 and it was already 8:50 now.

What should we do? Rivanah Whatsapped Ishita.

Wait. And don't look tensed.

Rivanah looked around smiling.

Don't smile like a fool too, Ishita Whatsapped.

Rivanah giggled and sent her a smiley emoticon.

At 9 pm sharp, a message popped up in Rivanah's phone from an unknown number.

Call Ekansh.

Rivanah frowned reading the stranger's message. She had a bad feeling about this. Was Ekansh alright? She looked at Ishita once. She hurriedly called Ekansh. He picked it up on the third ring.

'Hey babu!' He sounded busy.

'Hi, are you alright?' She couldn't hide the tension in her voice.

'No!'

Rivanah immediately missed a heartbeat.

'I'm fucking my life sitting in front of a computer in my office,' he said.

'Oh okay.' She relaxed a bit.

'But what happened?' he said.

'Nothing, just wanted to hear your voice,' she said quickly conjuring an excuse. 'I'm with Ishita. I'll call you later.' She cut the line and noticed another message had popped in by then from the same unknown number before.

I'm waiting inside.

Ishita's eyes followed Rivanah as the latter stood up taking a deep breath. There was momentary eye contact between the two girls. Ishita understood she had received some communication from the stranger. She kept her eyes fixed on Rivanah who ambled inside the air conditioned sitting area. Standing by the entrance, what she saw almost made her hurl. Ekansh sitting with a girl, their hands clasped on the table as they sipped on a single blue coloured mocktail together. There was a certain spark in their togetherness which made Rivanah feel they were long time lovers. She collapsed on the ground before Ishita could reach her.

11

The love that seems true isn't always true love.

The stranger had sent Rivanah this message sometime after Ishita, with the help of the restaurant staff, put her into an autorickshaw and took her back to their flat. Ishita had identified Ekansh from the pics Rivanah had shown her. Before the staff reached them, she glanced pleadingly at him a few times but Ekansh, for reasons best known to him, didn't leave his seat or the girl he was with. His face said he wanted to help but his action conveyed his reluctance. Ishita understood that perhaps he had kept the girl he was with in the dark about his relationship status as

well and approaching Rivanah would call for a lot of explanation.

Rivanah was semi-conscious in the autorickshaw and Ishita was trying her best to keep her awake.

'Should we go to a hospital?' Ishita asked slapping her cheeks softly.

'Home. Take me home,' Rivanah mumbled.

Her mother called. She knew she had to take the call. Summoning every ounce of energy left in her, she took the call.

'Hello mumma.'

'You don't sound good Mini.'

'Nothing mumma.'

'Is everything okay?'

She would have almost cried out when she stopped herself, 'Yes. Everything is okay. I have an exam tomorrow at office so I'm studying. I'll call you later.'

'But tomorrow is Sunday.'

‘I have an exam,’ she repeated and asked Ishita to switch off her mobile phone. After reaching their apartment, Ishita helped Rivanah to the bed where she slept for an hour and then, in her sleep, started crying. A disturbed Ishita woke her up only to find her cries transform into howls. Ishita tried her best to console her half-heartedly knowing well nothing could mend a broken heart except, maybe, time. Sometime later, when Rivanah had still not stopped sobbing, Ishita mixed a few sleeping pills that she often took with milk and coaxed Rivanah to have it. In no time, she was sound asleep.

A little after midnight, the doorbell rang. Ishita opened the door to find Ekansh.

‘What is it?’ she asked in disdain.

‘I want to talk to Rivanah.’

‘She is dead. How do you care?’

‘You don’t know anything about us, so don’t judge me.’

Ishita looked intently at Ekansh and said, 'You work in Mumbai itself and not Bangalore, right?'

Ekansh was quiet.

'And you would have never told the girls about each other till you were done with one of them, isn't it?'

'Look I wanted to…'

'You, or for that matter every other douchebag like you, are still alive because it is illegal to kill else I would have castrated you in the restaurant itself. Do you have any idea how much Rivanah loves you? If I see you around this place again, I'll call the police. Get lost,' screamed Ishita and closed the door on his face with a thud. She looked through the peephole only to see him wait for a minute and then leave.

Ishita went inside to check on Rivanah and heard her blabbering in her sleep: *I love you Ekansh. Don't leave me. Don't walk away. I won't do anything wrong. I have listened to you and I*

always will. I'm yours forever. Be mine always. The verbal ramblings continued all through the night. At times when she was quiet, Rivanah's body suddenly shuddered while her eyes oozed out tears. Ishita sat beside her all night, caressing her forehead whenever Rivanah spoke or cried. There was a moment when Ishita too broke down looking at her roomie pleading for love in her sleep. When she couldn't take it anymore, Ishita finished every drop of Vodka she had with her and slept.

Rivanah woke up in the morning feeling unpleasant about herself and about life in general. She heard Ishita talking to someone over phone in the other room. It was her mother.

'Why is Mini's phone switched off? Is she alright?' a worried Mrs Bannerjee asked on the phone. She and her husband had finally allowed Rivanah to stay in a PG only when Meghna explained how common a thing it was for young girls.

‘She has a little fever, aunty.’

‘Fever? She said she had an exam today.’

‘Wait, I’ll give the phone to Rivanah.’ Ishita pressed the mute button on her phone, went to Rivanah’s room, and saw she was lying on her bed staring at the sunny day outside through the window with swollen eyes and messed-up hair.

‘It’s your mother,’ Ishita said. ‘Talk to her.’ She passed on her phone to Rivanah.

‘I told her you have fever,’ Ishita whispered and sat beside her grasping her hand with assurance.

Rivanah sat up, cleared her throat, and said feebly, ‘Hello Mumma.’

She was having problem suppressing her pain.

‘What happened, Mini?’

Those were the words her mother said to her as a child whenever she went to her with a complaint. These words would make Rivanah howl till her mother hugged her tight and convinced her everything would be alright. And everything

indeed would become alright. But now she was a grown up. She couldn't go to her mother for every little problem no matter how much she wanted to. She simply couldn't tell her mother that Ekansh had turned out to be the asshole that she thought he could never be. That their fairy-tale romance had come to a brutal end. That true love indeed was like stardom and it didn't happen to everyone. Just that until yesterday she thought Ekansh and she didn't belong to that 'everyone' category. The sight of him clasping hands with the other girl flashed in front of her eyes, and she felt like her head would explode.

'Mini?'

Rivanah locked her jaws, took a deep breath, and said, 'Nothing mumma. Just a little fever.' She glanced at Ishita once.

'What about the exam?'

'It has been cancelled. My battery was exhausted so the phone got switched off

automatically. I'll charge it and switch it on in a minute,' she said and talked as normally as she could for the next two minutes before cutting the line. She gave the phone back to Ishita, released her hand from her grasp, drew her legs close to her chest, and sat looking out of the window. Ishita took her roomie's phone from beside her and switched it on.

'Get up!' Ishita said. 'Take a shower. Shit happens. Flush it before your emotional room starts to stink.'

'You don't get it, Ishu,' Rivanah said without looking at her. 'I loved Ekansh from all my heart and soul, and whatever there is that constitutes the core of me. He was my world, my everyfuckingthing. There was nothing beyond or before him.' Tears announced their presence in her eyes again.

Ishita scuffed and said, 'I won't understand?' She let go off a heavy breath. 'Some years ago,'

she began, ‘there was a prince charming who came into my life. I was nineteen then and he was thirty two. He was a smooth talker who pampered me silly. He made me feel like a princess who was born for good things. I was simply clean bowled by him and he knew it. Everything was so perfect. And all of it happened so fast that I felt I was living a dream. I even lost my virginity to him and after my graduation, I told my parents about him who took an instant liking to him. He was even ready to get married to me. Invitation cards of our engagement were printed and were about to be distributed when he vanished all of a sudden.’

‘Vanished?’ Rivanah now turned to look at her roomie.

‘Three months later, my father located him with the help of the police. He was living in Jalandhar with his wife and a kid. Basically, he began the affair with me when his wife was pregnant. But when he was confronted about it, he insulted my

dad and called me a whore. And his wife supported him on this. Can you beat that? All these prince charming types that we read about in books are actually prince chutiyas in real life. I cried, I sulked, I was depressed, I was angry, and then I accepted a simple fact: what shopping is for girls, sex is for guys. It's too basic an itch to be controlled with the dog-collar of loyalty.'

There was silence after which Ishita continued, 'Do you think it is possible for me to fall in love after this? The kind of love where you prefer to remain blindfolded because you trust your heart too much? Do you think it is possible to even live after knowing you won't ever be in love again because you will never ever trust anyone? Every time I think of him, I hate myself. I feel wasted.'

Rivanah stretched her legs, leaned forward to reach Ishita, and hugged her tight. The emotional storm brewing in Ishita calmed down.

‘Ekansh was here last night,’ Ishita said.

Rivanah broke the hug and looked at her, ‘What did he say?’

‘He works in Mumbai.’

And she thought he was flying for her from Bengaluru.

‘I don’t believe this.’ Rivanah’s jaws dropped.

‘You know I did slap my prince *chutiya* in front of his wife. That was my only comeuppance. You have to get yours otherwise you will keep crying forever.’

‘Hmm,’ Rivanah said. As her phone turned on, it started buzzing with continuous messages. There were fifty Whatsapp messages from Ekansh. Each of them said he was sorry and that he could explain himself. Rivanah immediately blocked him. She tapped on her Facebook app, next, and blocked him from her friend list as well and threw away the phone on the bed in disgust.

‘At least you guys weren’t physical. I can’t tell you how good I felt when that bastard made love to me for the first time. And now I feel like a fool thinking about it.’ Ishita observed how Rivanah hid her face with her hands.

‘Oh dear, when did that happen?’ The last time Ishita inquired, Rivanah was still a virgin.

‘He was here last weekend. We did it then,’ she said crying profusely.

‘Bloody mother-fucking faggot.’ Ishita said and consoled Rivanah caressing her back. ‘It’s okay. It’s not a big deal. At least your feelings for him were genuine.’

A few seconds later Ishita added, ‘By the way, you should be grateful to the stranger who disclosed this truth to you.’

Rivanah picked up her phone again and showed Ishita the stranger’s message: *The love that seems true isn’t always true love.*

‘It’s so correct,’ Ishita said, ‘We all are in love with the fictitious version of a real person; our self-made illusion. We commit ourselves to what’s going on and not to what really is. But...’ Ishita paused and then said, ‘Who is this stranger? And why doesn’t he help me out the way he helps you?’ Rivanah tried to smile looking at her roomie’s mischievous face.

‘I think you should at least thank him,’ Ishita said.

Rivanah was about to type a ‘thank you’ on her phone when Ekansh’s call came.

‘It’s Ekansh,’ Rivanah said.

‘It’s asshole; that’s his real name from now,’ Ishita said. ‘Take the call and ask him to meet you today at the Oberoi mall.’

The call turned to a missed call. Rivanah relaxed and said, ‘If he calls again...’

Before she could complete, Ekansh called again.

‘Pick up the call, girl,’ Ishita urged.

Rivanah picked up the call and said nothing.

'I want to meet you and explain...' Ekansh said but was cut short.

'Today at Oberoi mall around two,' Rivanah said in one breath and ended the call.

'Better!' Ishita quipped.

'Are you sure I should meet him? I don't want to.'

'You don't have to after this. And trust me, just give it back to him. You owe this much to yourself.'

Rivanah understood. Next she typed a 'thank you' and sent it to the last unknown number the stranger had sent her a message from. She waited but got no response.

Ishita had asked her to reach the mall an hour late than the fixed time. Rivanah did exactly that. Ekansh was a bit worked up when she reached the food court of the mall around three. Ishita too was with her.

‘You are late,’ Ekansh said.

‘You are an asshole,’ Rivanah retorted. ‘You have been in Mumbai all this time and I thought you flew from Bangalore for me. Only for me! What a fool you have made out of me Ekansh. Congrats!’

‘I swear I was going to tell you everything but...’

‘But your love for me stopped you, isn’t it? And exactly when were you going to tell me? When my dad had printed our marriage cards?’ She raised her voice to a level which he had not heard from her before.

‘Please, let’s talk like adults.’ He sounded defensive.

‘Stop patronizing me. And answer me, when were you going to tell me?’

‘Can I talk to you alone?’ He glanced at Ishita.

‘She stays with me.’

‘Okay, look I know I didn’t tell you that I was in Mumbai but that was because I didn’t want to upset

you since you were about to join your new office. So I was waiting for the right time.'

'Does it mean you never went to Bangalore?'

'Of course I did. And that's where I met Vishakha. I don't know why or when I fell in love with her. I couldn't believe it myself when it happened. Her company gave her a Mumbai location. I couldn't stop myself and followed her here. But that doesn't mean I can afford to lose you. Please try and understand.'

'You were with me for four years Ekansh, and Vishakha's been with you only for four months. You chose *her* and still you want *me* to understand?' Rivanah said, appalled. Did he think she would hug him and say she still loved him because he cared so much about her happiness that he didn't tell her he was cheating on her? Who was this person that she had been in love with? He suddenly seemed like someone whom she didn't know one bit.

‘I came to your flat with the intention of telling you last week but you wanted to make love and I thought of not disappointing you since you had been waiting for it from a long time,’ Ekansh said.

Rivanah noticed how ‘we wanted to make love’ had comfortably become ‘you wanted to make love’. She also noticed the way he was passively tagging himself as a poor guy who had made love to her only out of sympathy for her. If he was seriously the same person she was thinking of getting married to at some point in life, then there was something wrong with her.

‘Look, I think we can handle this without a break up,’ he said.

‘Does Vishakha know about us?’

‘She doesn’t know. But her knowing won’t change anything, will it? What’s going on between us is none of her business anyway,’ Ekansh said avoiding eye contact. ‘I love you and...’

Rivanah slapped him hard right across his face to shut him up. His jaws dropped. A few people in the food court stopped short in their tracks. Ishita's face glistened with a smile.

'You have no idea what it is to be in love, Ekansh. My parents were ready to accept you as their son-in-law. What will I tell them? I thought you were mine. Only mine. What shall I tell *myself*? That I'm an idiot who doesn't even know how to choose someone good for herself?' Rivanah was choking.

Ekansh's phone rang. Before he could hide it, she noticed the caller's name was Vishakha.

'Yes, I'm coming,' he said and cut the line.

'Someone's waiting for you Ekansh and that's not me. Goodbye and have a happy life with your girl,' said Rivanah and walked away. As Ekansh gaped at her walking away from him, Ishita pushed him by his chest and said, 'She doesn't know how to abuse so I say this on her behalf; you are a

mother-fucking-monkey, a cunt with an STD, and an impotent bastard.' Saying this, she dashed off.

Rivanah knew forgetting someone was easier said than done. Emotional investments are subject to life risks. But it was something she thought she wouldn't have to care about, after all Ekansh and she were the hyped FTC—the Fairy Tale Couple. Once inside her flat, she opened her wardrobe and one by one threw out all the gifts that Ekansh had given her into the dustbin and burnt the love letters he used to write for her in college. When she thought she had destroyed everything that reminded her of Ekansh she sat down in silence. In no time their memories started haunting her. And she knew this was something she would never be able to burn, delete, or throw away. The time they spent together, did it mean nothing to him? He said he didn't know how he fell in love with Vishakha. Did he ever think about her when he was with her? Was she so much better than her that he forgot

about her totally or did he purposefully subject her to this kind of insult by being in a relationship with another girl? And why did he make love to her when he wasn't interested in her? It was like he had brought her to the room of love by promising her a beautiful future after which he locked the room and threw the keys away. And now she had nowhere to go. Ishita was right: what shopping is for girls, sex is for guys. Ekansh must have made the other girl feel beautiful as well by fucking her.

With Ishita gone for a rave party, Rivanah felt all the more lonely. She logged on to her Facebook account to distract herself, but all she saw was her friends posting happy pictures with their loved ones. She hated them all and she hated herself more for hating them. She impulsively deactivated her account. She was tossing and turning on bed, telling herself repeatedly it was not the end of the world and the next moment doubting it herself when her phone buzzed with a message:

Welcome.

It was the stranger's response to her 'thank you' in the morning from a new phone number.

Rivanah immediately messaged him back:

Why didn't you tell me this before?

Prompt came a reply: *You can simply talk. I can hear you. I'll reply by message.*

Rivanah sat up on her bed the moment she read the message; startled. For the next one hour she left no corner of the flat unturned—under the bed, the kitchen, the television stand, the balcony, the wardrobe, and where not. Finally, she moved the wardrobe to see if there was anything behind it but shrieked seeing several cockroaches. She put the wardrobe back in place. Sweaty and tired, Rivanah's mind was still trying to guess how someone could hear her without being in the flat? She heard her phone buzz with a message:

If you are done searching, you can talk.

With a chill in her spine she spoke aloud looking nowhere in particular, 'Since how long have you known about Ekansh and that girl?' It was weird talking to someone she couldn't see. Seconds later, the stranger's message came:

Since the time he came to Mumbai following her.

'And why didn't you tell me this before?'

I wanted to hurt you real bad.

'What? Why? What have I done to you?' she said aloud.

You didn't learn to cook.

'What nonsense!'

If you are not badly hurt, you don't learn. If you don't learn, you don't grow. If you don't grow, you don't live. If you don't live, you don't know your worth. If you don't know your worth, then what's the point?

'You would have shared this even if I had learnt to cook, isn't it?'

Maybe.

'But my love for Ekansh was true. You know what the worst thing is? Not that I have to live with the fact that Ekansh cheated on me but the fact that I won't ever be able to love anyone with the kind of blindness, innocence, and selflessness that I loved him. How do I come to terms with that?' She didn't know why she was saying all these things to a stranger but she wanted to talk, she wanted a vent and some sort of answers.

How: that's your business. I'll tell you why: heartbreaks are like those pestering advertisements that make you believe a particular product is important for you. They create a false space in you and convince you that it's your need. Ekansh isn't important. You are. There's more to you as a person and in your life than cribbing for a guy who can only limit you from reaching your real worth.

‘What is my real worth? I’m a simple girl who only wanted to work till she got married to the guy of her dreams and then raise a family with him, grow old with him, and probably die in his arms. I know it sounds like a story from *Mills & Boons* but that’s me.’

That’s NOT you. You shall soon know who you really are.

‘Huh? But who are you? Why are you helping me?’ Rivanah said and after a hiatus added, ‘I want to meet you.’

Anonymity is power, Mini, the stranger replied.

12

The sudden break-up led to a certain organic change in Rivanah. She abhorred spending time alone, knowing well her ‘me-time’ would invariably be accompanied by the memories of Ekansh. And it always put her in the middle of a dichotomy: to cry or not to cry.

Both Ishita and Pooja asked her to move on but nobody told her how. Human beings are designed in a way that they always live with one half of their self in the past and the other half in the present. For Rivanah, the problem was that the past was about Ekansh’s presence and her present was about his absence. She couldn’t forget her past and she

couldn't accept her present. Though Rivanah had blocked Ekansh on Facebook, time and again she would first activate her profile, unblock him, check his latest profile and cover pictures and whatever that she could see without being in his friend list, and block him again conveniently. It only meant he still mattered to her. It made her hate herself even more. She knew he ditched her and still he mattered to her. What depressed her the most was the fact that Ekansh never understood that in love one's own choice affects the other the most. With one single choice of his, he had turned her life upside down. Whenever the thought of Ekansh and Vishakha invaded her, she used to put heavy make-up on and click selfies only to post them on Facebook in order to garner more and more likes. The likes and comments made her feel important. It was her way of defending her own pride which had been punctured.

In office, Rivanah started working even harder. She robbed her own free space and time for herself. She had secretly bought the same sleeping pills which Ishita used to take once in a while. Almost every night after dinner, Rivanah would pop one before crashing on the bed. The pills gave her a sound sleep even though she knew it would harm her in the long run. *But then, who gives a damn about the long run,* she thought, *when living one single day without feeling miserable about myself is becoming an achievement?* The truth was the roots of her commitment to Ekansh had entered so deep within her that pulling them out wasn't possible without developing cracks within her own self. And she knew well those cracks won't let any other root to develop,no matter how much time went by.

As days changed to weeks, Rivanah discovered certain behavioural changes in her as well. Earlier, if any guy would glance at her fishing for her

attention, she would pretend the guy didn't exist. Now she would glance back as if she was hooked to him and wouldn't mind if he came and talked to her. She would reciprocate politely but later would take pleasure in avoiding the guy as if nothing ever happened. Ekansh's action had taught her how unimportant she was to him and the one thing she would never let any guy do to her again was make her feel that way, she promised herself.

As a mark of gratitude to the stranger one day, Rivanah decided to cook something simple. She made dal, rice, and aloo-matar. It was below satisfactory but tasting her own preparation made her happy and worthwhile. Her mother couldn't believe when she told her about it.

'Did Ekansh ask you to cook?' Mrs Bannerjee said.

'Why does Ekansh have to tell me everything? I did it myself,' Rivanah said in irritation.

‘Don’t get angry Mini. Your baba will be so happy to know that you have started taking interest in cooking.’

‘It tastes nothing great but by the time I visit Kolkata next, I shall surely improve.’

And improve she did. Listening to songs and preparing a new dish in her free time worked as a therapy for her agitated soul. In a span of a month and a half, she became an expert at preparing mouth-watering butter chicken. Ishita was floored when she tasted it for the first time.

‘I would have married you right now if I was a man,’ she said.

Rivanah laughed out and messaged the stranger that she now knew how to prepare the dishes he had asked her to. But there was no response.

On weekends, following the break up, Ishita made sure Rivanah accompanied her to the nightclubs.

‘At least have fun before your parents get a husband for you.’

The edge that Ishita balanced her life on was a temptation to begin with for Rivanah and now she had the perfect motivation to go ahead and anchor her life beside that edge.

While Ishita danced and openly hit on men in nightclubs and pubs, Rivanah preferred drinking alone sitting by a corner and return to her flat totally sloshed, cursing Ekansh with newer and unapologetically vulgar slangs every time. Once she had written the name ‘Ekansh’ on her pillow with her lipstick after coming back zoned-out by Tequila and then had spent an hour cutting the pillow into innumerable pieces wailing to herself.

The noise at the disc, the disconnection that booze brought her, and the freedom that she chose for herself opened a new world for her, both outside and within. Lying to her parents on the phone became a habit. It was like a rebirth for her.

The earlier Rivanah was someone who used to live by rules. The new Rivanah lived by fucking those rules. She soon developed severe mood swings because of which she sometimes skipped her meals for days and at times ate like there was no tomorrow. She didn't look sick but she didn't look normal either. She laughed her heart out at trivial matters, embarrassing everyone around, while remained neutral on actual jokes. One day Prateek spotted her in the office canteen sitting alone by a table and with a huge pile up of food that aroused his suspicion.

'Hey, is there anyone else with you?' he asked, not sure whether to sit down or not.

'No. Why?' She was talking to him after a long time. They did greet each other once or twice during their casual encounters in office, but that was about it.

'Nothing,' he said deciding not to probe her about the extra food. 'May I?' He placed a hand on

the chair opposite her.

'Sure.' Rivanah didn't look at him. Prateek took his seat beside her.

'Anything the matter? You look...different,' he said.

'Where have you been all these days, Prateek? I didn't see you much in office,' she said this time linking her eyes to his.

'Thanks for asking.' A halo of happiness appeared around him. 'I went home for a cousin's marriage,' he said, 'But what's up with you really?'

'Nothing, why?'

'I can see something is wrong.'

Really? Can he really feel my pain? Is he that special? Rivanah thought and quietly continued with her heavy lunch.

'Ekansh has broken-up with you, isn't it? I don't see him in your friend list anymore. In fact you too are sometimes there and sometimes not on

Facebook,' he added without knowing how she would react to his covert stalking.

He hasn't stopped snooping around, Rivanah thought and then spat out the bolus on her plate. She gulped a mouthful of Coke, rinsing her mouth once.

'Ekansh didn't break up. I broke up. He cheated,' she said with a straight face.

'Wow, sounds like one of those campus novels written by college goers these days; *I Broke Up, He Cheated*' Prateek said beaming to himself.

'Would you have cheated on me Prateek if you were my boyfriend?' She didn't know why she asked him that.

For a moment Prateek thought he didn't hear her correctly. His stare urged her to repeat it.

'Forget it,' she said. 'Now I know how you must have felt when I rejected you in school.'

'It's okay Rivanah. Even if you don't love me, I'll always love you.'

With that one statement, Prateek changed the way Rivanah looked at him since her joining Tech Sky Technologies. Here was a guy who loved her even when he knew she probably would never be his. And there was a guy who knew she was his and yet...she smiled at the irony of it.

'What are you doing this evening? Want to catch the latest superhero film? Heard its better than its first part,' he asked with the same excitement that he always exhibited in front of her, the excitement she earlier interpreted as dangerous but which was now turning infectious.

'Let's go,' she said.

◆

After that evening, going out with Prateek became a habit. It introduced her to yet another side of her own self: Rivanah realized that with Prateek she could choose when to be good and when to play a bitch. Such a choice wasn't there with Ekansh

because she loved him. She was with Prateek only because she wanted to prove to her own self that she wasn't as undesirable as Ekansh made her feel. That she too was capable of having a pet who could do whatever she wished him to only to gain a little attention from her. She knew it was mean of her to be doing something like this, but the forbidden pleasure of doing it overcame the morals associated with it.

They went out only when she wanted to, but when Prateek would request for some coffee-time together, she had her excuses ready. When she Whatsapped him that she was feeling like having an ice cream at midnight, Prateek would ride his bike to her apartment carrying two cones. But when he'd ask her to dine together, she'd have a sudden headache. There were times of self-introspection too when she asked herself if what she was doing was at all justified. After which the sight of Ekansh clasping the girl's hand in Cafe

Basilico would flash in her mind and she would convince herself if what Ekansh did to her was justified, then this too was more than justified.

One day while sitting in the Barista cafe at Band Stand, Prateek asked her, 'Have you forgotten Ekansh totally?'

'Yes,' Rivanah replied promptly lest her lie be caught.

'Then is there any place for me now?'

This was the propose moment which she knew could happen anytime and thus she had her answer ready.

'We should take it slowly, Prateek. I just had a break up. I don't want you to be my rebound.'

Prateek sat gloomily for some time and then said, 'I think you are right, but I'm scared too.'

'Scared of what?'

'What if someone else takes the place before I do? I lost my chance once in school. I don't want to lose you again.'

Rivanah sat in silence sipping her coffee and looking at the horizon far across the Bandstand on whose lap the sun was setting. She would have to convince Prateek to give it some more time without being obvious that she didn't really love him.

'Do you believe in destiny Prateek?' she asked.

'I do.'

'So do I. And if we are destined to be together, then we will. Let's not kill our friendship trying to force things upon it.' She tried to sound as mild as possible. Come what may, she didn't want to disturb what she had formed with him over the course of a few weeks; a relationship with no stakes from her side.

'Alright,' Prateek said. 'By the way, can we please have dinner together? Last week you had a headache so we couldn't go.'

'Oh dear. I would have love to, but I'm menstruating, and my stomach hurts real bad on the

second day. In fact, my abdomen is already aching a bit.'

'Can I do something to ease the pain?'

'No, thanks. Not tonight. Let's have dinner some other time. Okay?'

Rivanah had had her periods two weeks ago. The real reason why she avoided going out with Prateek was that she had to accompany Ishita to a private party at one of her friend's place.

'But what will I do there!' she had complained to Ishita a few hours ago.

'You will get free ka daaru. Do you need any other reason?' Ishita had argued. A happy Rivanah gladly nodded.

The party was in a luxurious flat at a posh apartment in Aarey Milk Colony in Goregaon east. The two stayed there till 2:30 in the morning. Ishita was wrong. The alcohol was actually beer, which was no alcohol for someone who had developed a

fetish for whiskey in the weekends. Rivanah was cross with Ishita when they finally left the party.

They were walking alone, abusing each other on a lonely road looking for an autorickshaw but there was not a single one in sight. They walked ahead a little further till the main road. Ishita felt a strong urge to pee.

'What else will you do if you drink five mugs of beer!' Rivanah exclaimed. Ishita excused herself and went toward the bushes on the left side of the road. With Ishita gone, the scary silence around suddenly made its presence felt to Rivanah.

'Don't go far,' she said. Ishita didn't reply.

Rivanah stood alone checking her Whatsapp friend list on her phone. Some muffled noise called for her attention from beyond the dense bushes on the right. With an ominous curiosity that fear sometimes brings forth, she took a few steps toward the bushes. Little away beyond a tiny bush she could now see a guy kneeling down trying to

force his mouth on... Rivanah tilted her head a bit and saw a young girl. She was trying to set herself free from the clutches of the boy. Her mouth was tied so all that came out were helpless muffled nothings. There was another guy too, naked from waist down, trying to force himself on the girl. For a moment Rivanah couldn't move, think, breathe. The power with which they held the girl was frightening.

'Hello?'

She heard Ishita's voice. Before it could reach the guys' ears, Rivanah ran out into the road, took Ishita by her hand, and simply started running toward the main road.

'What's up girl?' Ishita said, feeling her friend's tight grip on her arm.

'Be quiet and keep running,' was all Rivanah could whisper. Ishita didn't know why she was looking back from time to time.

They finally got an autorickshaw. Once the vehicle was at a safe distance, Rivanah heaved a sigh of relief. Ishita looked at her inquiringly but Rivanah didn't share what she had witnessed a minute back. Reaching home, sheupdated her status on Facebook: *Every rapist's balls should be chopped off!*

Plugging her ears with her headphones and playing a Taylor Swift number, she forgot about the matter in no time.

13

Every day after getting upin the morning, Rivanah would first check her Facebook profile from her phone. The morning after she posted her opinion on rapists on Facebook, Rivanah saw the post had received over one hundred likes and several comments echoing her sentiments. She felt happy to have updated her status, for the first time, with a cocky message.

Rivanah was reminded of the dastardly incident when her mother mentioned it to her on the phone after she reached office. She was surprised the incident had been reported in a national newspaper. Rivanah took a copy of the newspaper

from one of her colleagues and found the article on the second page.

TEENAGER GANGRAPED

Mumbai: A 15-year-old girl was gangraped last night in the Aarey Milk Colony area in Goregaon east. She was found by a sweeper in the morning who informed the authorities. The girl was admitted to a municipal hospital in Borivali in a comatose state.

The hunt for the rapists is on. Police is waiting for the girl to regain her senses.

The girl's mother works as a maid in one of the nearby residential colonies.

Rivanah had a sinking feeling as she finished reading the article. She had witnessed the beastility. She didn't remember their faces clearly, but she was confident of identifying them if someone brought them in front of her; both the rapists as well as the girl.

The memory of the incident didn't let her focus on her work. At lunch, Prateek came to her looking rather excited.

'Joyita and Dilip are getting married.'

Joyita was from the HR department whereas Dilip was from one of the software developing teams. Rivanah didn't know Joyita, but she had met Dilip a couple of times.

'That's great!' she said.

'What is even greater is that they are throwing a pre-wedding party for all of us tonight.'

'Us? They don't even know me that well.'

'Joyita knows me and I know you. I told her you'll join me.'

Rivanah's instinct didn't want her to go.

'Where is the party?' she asked.

'Trilogy, Juhu.'

Trilogy was one of her favourite places.

'Okay,' she said. Prateek could have jumped with joy.

‘I’ll pick you up around nine from your place,’ he said and left.

◆

Prateek arrived a little after nine and waited on his bike outside Rivanah’s building. When she came out, he almost fainted. She looked ravishing.

‘At least shut your mouth, for God’s sake!’ Rivanah said and climbed on his pillion.

‘Why do I have to drive the bike? Why can’t I just admire you?’

‘Ho gaya? Now please drive.’ It was one of the few times Rivanah would allow Prateek to flirt with her mildly when she was in a good mood.

There were a total of ten people from the office at Trilogy. Rivanah knew none of them personally, except for Prateek. A cake was brought out for Joyita and Dilip and after the cake cutting session, Rivanah, along with some others, ordered their favourite poison. She gulped hers in one go. Then

she ordered another. And another. Totally inebriated, she hit the dance floor grabbing Prateek by the hand. Dancing beside her, Prateek sensed alcohol was slowly taking control of her. She smiled at him, then casually put her hands around his neck, and turned to gyrate her hips against his groin. It aroused him. As she turned once again to face him, he gave her a sly smile, placed his hands around her waist, and brought her close to him. Looking into his eyes, Rivanah suddenly felt the DJ had lowered the volume even though she could see everyone dancing around her. With every second, she seemed to be getting closer to Prateek. Or was it he who was getting close to her? Prateek tilted his face and leaned forward. She knew what was going to happen but the alcohol's spell was so strong that it didn't let her pull away. Prateek's lips soon pursed hers and for the next two minutes, they smooched each other hungrily. When the music stopped, Rivanah pushed Prateek away and went

towards one of the couches. The music changed as Prateek followed her out.

'Drop me home, Prateek.' Rivanah suddenly sounded rude. She knew something wrong had happened, but her mind was too numb to know what.

'Let's stay for sometime more,' Prateek pleaded.

'No!' she said trying to stabilize herself.

Joyita came to Prateek and said, 'I think you should take her home. She seems wasted.'

'I have a bike. And she does look sloshed. Won't it be risky?' Prateek argued.

Dilip joined them and suggested Joyita and he would drop her in his car on their way back.

The next day, Rivanah came late to office. She had a vague remembrance of what had happened between Prateek and her in Trilogy. She found a few men looking at her in an amused manner during lunch hour, laughing in hushed tones. When Prateek didn't join her for lunch, she called him to ask him

to join her. By the time he reached, her lunch was over.

'What happened?' he said without caring to sit down. She could sense a change in his overall demeanour.

'Is anything wrong?' she asked.

Prateek kept a straight face for some time and then broke into a chuckle.

'What is it Prateek?' Rivanah asked in a stern voice.

'Say, "What is it Prateek, sir".'

'Are you out of your mind?'

Prateek handed her his phone. She took it and pressed on the play button of the video on the screen. She stopped it mid-way even before she could see the details of her smooch with him. Whoever had recorded it had used the zoom-in and out option to a vulgar perfection.

'I waited for this moment for a long time,' Prateek said. 'Remember how you made a mockery

of me when I proposed to you in school? “Rejected piece”—that was my nickname for the rest of my school life. If you wanted to, you could have said no in a sober way but you didn’t. You had to make a scene out of it. Now the same Rivanah Bannerjee who turned me into a rejected piece in school will be my bitch.’ He scoffed in a way that scared Rivanah.

‘I have already apologized for that Prateek. I...’

‘Are you going to fall on my feet now, Rivanah?’ Prateek’s voice had a loathsome condescension.

‘I’ll complain about it to the higher authority. You can’t record me without my permission.’

‘Sure, do complain. The clip doesn’t show me raping you. And my colleagues have seen you getting close to me. So yes, go ahead complain and meanwhile I shall waste no time in circulating this clip on the internet and telling people how much you wanted to record our private moment. And you know what happens when this kind of thing hits the

virtual world? The girl's real world gets fucked.' He chuckled and left whistling a raunchy Bollywood item number.

Rivanah sat down on the chair with a thud, holding her head which was reeling. How could she have not seen it coming? How could she trust Prateek so much? How could she be such a fool?

At night, a sobbing Rivanah shared the incident with Ishita.

'If it was not for the clip, I would have squashed his balls tonight itself,' Ishita said clenching her jaws.

'I think I should go back home.' Rivanah said wondering how she had cried more than smiled in the last two-three months.

'Stop talking like a retard! I'm sure there's some way out. Nobody can blackmail a girl like that.' Ishita was pacing up and down the room.

'Why don't you ask the stranger to help you?' It was Asha who surprised both Ishita and Rivanah

with her appearance.

A glimmer of hope shone on Ishita's face. 'That's a good idea!' she chirped. 'But how do you know about him?'

'I know about my roomies more than they know about me,' Asha said and went inside the washroom. Ishita and Rivanah exchanged a blank look.

'She must have overheard us discussing the stranger,' Ishita said.

'Should I?' Rivanah asked a pause later.

'Well, we don't have much option. We can go to the police and I'm sure they will burst Prateek's ass but what if he circulates the MMS before that...'

Before Ishita could finish, Rivanah sent a message to the stranger.

Hi! Are you there? Rivanah could have spoken it aloud, but she did not want to disclose every little thing to Ishita. It was something between the

stranger and her. *The stranger and her*, that sounded so much like a relationship with no name. A minute later a reply came:

Always.

I need some help, Rivanah messaged back.

I can get you the clip, the stranger replied. Rivanah read the message aloud.

'So he already knows about it,' Ishita said in wonder.

By when can you get it for me? Rivanah asked.

For now you do yourself a little favour. What favour? she asked.

The stranger's reply turned Rivanah's face pale.

14

Rivanah sat at her office desk the following morning, staring miserably at her computer screen. Her colleagues were discussing something with the team lead but she wasn't interested. She felt devoid of any motivation to work but she had to. For a 22-year-old like her, working away from home in a big city, life behaved like a spoilt brat. In the few months that she had been in Mumbai, she understood that nothing came for free.

Rivanah had not shared with Ishita what favour the stranger had asked of her.

'He didn't respond,' she told her. But a message in fact did come and in the message, the stranger

had asked her to do an impossible task. A message popped on her office messenger from Prateek interrupting her thoughts.

'I want to see you in the no-smoking zone in a minute.'

The message turned her livid enough to want to smash Prateek's skull into pieces. But all she did was take a deep breath and diffuse the anger within her. She was a fool for having trusted him. Ishita had told her once: people judge the unknown from the known. Rivanah was fooled by Prateek because he looked like a *lalloo* and she believed he was one. The same mistake that she committed with Ekansh; she thought because Ekansh loved her, he would be loyal to her. When she couldn't catch him even after knowing him so well, how could she have known Prateek's intention? Ekansh and now Prateek had taught her well that the known and the unknown are two different things. Rivanah didn't

know whether to feel miserable, laugh, or cry because of the mess she had got herself in.

Waiting.

Prateek whatsapped her this time. Rivanah stood up, turned the desk computer on sleep mode, and went out into the no-smoking zone.

Rivanah could see Prateek standing alone, smoking a cigarette. This was the first time she was seeing him smoke, but she didn't care to inquire about it. Prateek flashed his Samsung tablet when she approached him.

'Red or black?' he said.

Rivanah couldn't believe her eyes. On the tablet's screen was a page from a popular online lingerie store website displaying a particular brain both red and black colour.

'I'm buying this for you,' Prateek said pointing to the red bra. He looked pleased to see Rivanah's bewildered face. 'I want you to wear it this weekend when you come to my place.'

Should I admire his audacity or slap the indecency out of his system? she wondered but she was too shell-shocked to do either. A moment later, she found her voice.

'I told you Prateek, I'm sorry for rejecting your proposal in school, then why…'

'Red or black?' He meant business.

'Prateek, please don't do this to me. I'm your friend now and...'

'Red. OR. Black?'

Rivanah went quiet.

'Prateek!' one of Prateek's colleagues called out to him.

'Okay. I'll order both,' he said. 'We will have lots of time for you to wear both as well as not wear any,' he said winking at Rivanah.

'And by the way just in case you are still considering your option of complaining about me then let me tell you that I have located all your

cousins on Facebook. I don't think they will like it seeing you smooch in a video, will they?'

Rivanah swallowed a lump. Prateek turned and went away.

Rivanah went back to her desk feeling disoriented. Reaching her desk, she unlocked her phone and opened the message inbox. The stranger's message was still in her phone. What he was asking her to do was impossible! She checked his message again:

Be the eyewitness in the gangrape case.

He had asked a simple favour of her in return for the clip that had stolen her sleep. She read the message for the umpteenth time. A night before, she considered telling her father everything by sending him a message because she knew she would never be able to confess it verbally: 'Baba, I was drunk when I became intimate with Prateek in the disc but I didn't know that he would record it. I don't know what to do now. Please help me.' Reading

the message, she thought of the number of questions that would be hurled at her by her father:

'What were you doing in a disc Mini?'

'Haven't we asked you to get back home every day by nine at night?'

'Did you say you were drunk? Since when have you started consuming alcohol? Even I haven't done that in my whole life.'

'Who is Prateek? Does Ekansh know about him? How can you be so mean to him?'

'Why is Prateek blackmailing you?'

The queries would give way to her father's eventual decision: Pack your bags and come here. No need to work anymore. We'll get you married off soon.

Rivanah, in the end, had decided to keep it all to herself. But little did she know Prateek would actually stoop so low as to blackmail her into being his sexual slave for the weekend. She left her cubicle and rushed to the washroom. By the time

she glanced at herself in the mirror, the kohl in her eyes had already been smudged by her tears. She splashed some water on her face. Why couldn't the stranger arrange for the clip without her being the witness in the gangrape case? What was his stake in it? She immediately messaged him:

Why does it matter to you if I become the witness in the case? Is the girl related to you?

She waited for a few minutes but got no reply. Rivanah was about to move out when her phone buzzed with a message.

She isn't related to me. But by that logic I shouldn't help you out with the clip either because you too are not related to me.

Rivanah typed a reply and sent it back hurriedly.

Do you even know how much of a hassle it is? It involves the law. My parents as well as the media will know and what if I get threatened by the men who raped the girl? Just so you know, I

did make people aware of it by posting how I felt on my Facebook profile. I did my part.

The stranger replied:

Your part? What you did on Facebook is called bullshitting. Social networking sites are nothing but virtual commodes for people to shit their opinion on and then conveniently presume their job's done. Their only agenda is to feel good about themselves by convincing themselves that ejecting thoughts is as responsible an act as producing an action. How many of them really go out of their way in the real world and do something about a matter? Did anyone who liked your post buy the girl medicines? Did anyone come forward to sponsor her hospital bill? Did you?

How do you know I was a witness? Were you there too? If yes then why don't you become the witness as well? Rivanah typed back.

I didn't see the faces of the rapists.

May I know what your stake is if I become the eyewitness in the case?

You are my stake.

Why me?

Why not you? he shot back.

Okay, if I become the witness, what's the guarantee you will give me the clip? Why don't you give me the clip first and then I'll see what I can do?

What's the guarantee that I won't take the clip from Prateek and circulate it on the internet myself? The world doesn't run on guarantees, Mini. It runs on faith.

I don't have faith on men anymore.

LOL. How are you so sure I'm a man?

Rivanah swallowed a lump. She had yet again repeated her mistake of judging the stranger too soon based on someone else's judgement. Ishita only guessed the person was a secret admirer. And was there a diktat every secret admirer of hers had

to be a man? God, she didn't even know if he admired her or was it something else! Another message.

Be Prateek's weekend bitch or stand up for the girl: take your call, Mini.

Rivanah took a moment to think: the police was not an option lest Prateek circulated the clip, her parents were not an option lest they asked her to come back home, and being a weekend bitch to Prateek was definitely not an option either. Her hands shook subtly as she typed her final decision to the stranger.

Okay. I shall be the eyewitness but promise me you will get me the clip before this weekend. Otherwise, I won't fullfil my side of the bargain.

Have faith, replied the stranger.

Rivanah picked up a local English tabloid during lunchtime. In a couple of days' time, the news of the gangrape had travelled from the front to the fifth page. The tiny article said the girl was

still admitted at the municipal hospital in Borivali where she was initially taken and the police were yet to identify the rapists because the girl was unable to give them any leads.

Rivanah called Ishita asking if she could join her without telling her the reason or the destination. Ishita said she had a night shift in office and would be free only the next morning. It was Thursday and Rivanah didn't want to waste a single day now that she knew what Prateek had in mind for the weekend.

She left her office an hour early to avoid the office crowd. She took an autorickshaw from Goregaon east and went directly to the municipal hospital in Borivali. The scene in the hospital was abysmal. The place was dirty, with a pungent smell of medicines lurking in the air. There were people who were either howling or running around or sitting helplessly, waiting for their turn for check-up to come. Rivanah tried to locate the reception

amid the crowd, but to no success. She soon located a police constable chatting with a middle-aged man who was carrying a camera around his neck, with a glass of tea in his hand. She went to them.

'Excuse me,' she said. Both the constable and the man with the camera looked at her with an expression that said they didn't expect her to be there.

'*Kaye paije*?' the constable asked in Marathi.

'What do you want?' the man with the camera translated. He seemed educated as well as less terrifying than the pot-bellied constable.

'I have come to see the gangrape victim. Do you know which room she is in?'

The constable and the man exchanged a surprised look.

'Are you a relative?' the man asked.

'No. I'm an eyewitness in the case.'

Both the men suddenly turned alarmed.

The constable asked her to follow him. Rivanah and the man with camera followed him closely behind.

It was not a private room as Rivanah had thought it would be. It was the general ward housing people suffering from all kinds of problems—fractures, bullet wounds, animal attack, and burns. In the middle of all this was a young girl who lay in the silence of her sleep. There was a middle-aged lady sitting beside her on the dirty bed itself. Rivanah guessed she would be her mother.

'She wakes up, screams, and then the nurse has to make her sleep,' the constable said. 'Did you really see the guys who did this to her?'

Rivanah couldn't speak or move. She had a strong urge to throw up. The newspaper said the girl was fifteen but she looked much younger. She wondered if the girl would ever be able to come to terms with the wounds that had been inflicted on her soul without any fault of hers. The hair on her

nape stood up thinking what would have happened if she was in her place. The girl suddenly woke up as her body started shuddering vehemently. Though her eyes were shut, she was screaming her lungs out as if the devil had possessed her. The constable yelled something in Marathi. A nurse came running towards them, blabbering something in Marathi as well, and quickly gave her an injection. The girl gradually went quiet once again. By then, Rivanah had tasted bile.

The constable took her to the Goregaon police station with him and documented her statement. The man with the camera, who Rivanah later learnt was a small-time journalist with a Marathi newspaper wanted to click a picture of her but decided not to on her request. Soon police inspector Mohan Kamble joined them and inquired about what Rivanah had witnessed. She hadn't sipped any alcohol the night of the incident unlike Ishita and that made her claim all the more strong.

‘Sir,’ Rivanah said glancing first at the journalist and then at Kamble, ‘I don’t want to be named or exposed in the media or in front of the rapists. Is that possible?’

‘Don’t worry madam. I’ll take care of that,’ Kamble assured her. ‘Your gesture is really commendable, otherwise who cares these days?’

She felt like a slap of shame hit her. She knew well that the real intention behind her appearance at the police station was selfish, but a small part of her also understood what the stranger had meant when he asked her to know her worth. Though there was a dichotomy in her situation, the fact nevertheless was she did give her statement as an eyewitness. She *did* decide to help the girl.

‘Do your parents know you go to late night parties?’ Kamble asked.

‘No,’ Rivanah replied meekly.

‘That’s what worries parents these days. It doesn’t matter how close you are to your children,

they will never be completely honest with you,' Kamble said. 'I actually have a daughter your age.' The fatherly warmth in Kamble's demeanour was evident. 'Her name is Smita. She works in a software company in Bangalore. It's tough to live in a big city all alone, isn't it?'

With a stranger trailing me, a colleague trying to blackmail me, and me presenting myself as an eyewitness in a rape case, tell me about how tough it is living in a big city, Rivanah thought to herself and said with tight smile, 'It indeed is. But one can't really help it.'

'I remain tensed about Smita all the time. These days, anything can happen,' Kamble said in a worried tone. 'Please do let me know if you ever have any opening in your company. I want her to work in Mumbai itself.'

Parents will be parents. 'Sure,' Rivanah said and a moment later added, 'How long do I have to stay here?'

‘Some time more. All you have to do is identify the two men from a group of people we have rounded up from the area. They’ll be here shortly. You can hide your face while doing it,’ Kamble said and gestured to the female constable who escorted her to an adjacent room. She waited there for some time. In-between her mother called.

‘Did you reach home Mini?’ she asked.

‘I’m on my way mumma,’ Rivanah lied. ‘Tell me something mumma, would you like the rapists to be caught and punished?’

‘Which rapists? What are you saying?’ Her mother sounded tensed.

‘The ones who raped the teenager in Mumbai a few days back. Remember you told me about it on phone?’

‘Oh yes! I definitely want them to be caught and punished. They spoilt the life of an innocent girl.’

‘Hmm.’ Rivanah took a long breath. ‘I will call you mumma when I reach home,’ she said and cut

the line.

When the rounded-up men arrived in a police van, she was made to wrap a cloth around her face. One by one, two constables brought in the men. It wasn't difficult for her to identify the two rapists amongst the fifteen men. She later learnt from Kamble that they worked as labourers in the nearby construction site and weren't from Maharashtra.

Kamble gave her his contact number and also took her office number as well as home contact information and asked her not to leave the city without informing him. Kamble had started seeing his daughter in her and wanted to safeguard her from danger. She was told that she would have to appear in the court and testify against the men once the charge sheet was submitted.

'Will it take time?' she asked.

'I hope not.'

Rivanah soon left. Kamble arranged for a police jeep to drop her home.

At night when she messaged the stranger saying she had become the official eyewitness in the gangrape case, the stranger replied with an address in Andheri west and asked her to be there on Saturday night at nine sharp.

'Why?' a worried Rivanah asked. She was again talking aloud sitting in her flat alone when the stranger messaged her on the phone.

Prateek lives there.

'What? That's what he wanted anyway; for me to visit his place this Saturday night. Please tell me you are kidding,' she said sounding nervous.

Do you trust me? the stranger asked in the next message.

Trust a stranger? She had trusted both Ekansh and Prateek before when she thought she knew them well. Should she trust someone she knew nothing about? Rivanah took her time before she

said aloud, ‘Yes.’ She hoped and prayed nothing would go wrong this time.

15

There was still one more day to go before Saturday night arrived. Rivanah kept leading Prateek on. She gave him forced smiles whenever he was around and accompanied him to the canteen or the no-smoking zone whenever he asked her to for some fake love talk. He asked her to come to his place on Friday night itself, but she lied to him saying she was having muscle spasms owing to an early period and would visit him on Saturday night for sure. Prateek took the bait and agreed to wait for one day more.

Saturday arrived. Rivanah was feeling apprehensive. She had a bad feeling about what

she was going to do. She wanted to share it with Ishita but didn't because one thing she had learnt in the last few months was not to trust anybody beyond a certain limit. You never know when that person will go against you. And a friend who knows your secret can be far worse than an enemy. She had also decided this was the last time she would listen to the stranger too. She didn't know why the stranger was so hell-bent on helping her. There had to be an agenda. But at that moment, she only cared about the clip and nothing else.

Sipping the evening tea while standing by her room's window, she wondered if the stranger would really help her with the clip or not. What if the stranger was Prateek? Would it be safe to go to his address at night? The world runs on faith, the stranger had said and it was faith that, owing to her experience in the past months, had depleted from her core. Well, almost.

Rivanah finished her tea in a rush and waited for the clock to strike eight. Once it was time, she dressed herself in a jeans and t-shirt, took a knife from her kitchen and kept it in her bag as a safety precaution, and put inspector Kamble's phone number on speed dial number one. It took her thirty minutes in an autorickshaw to reach the Andheri west address. It seemed like a posh colony from outside. The stranger had said nine so she waited at a corner outside the colony till 8:55 and then went in. The security guard asked her to write her name in the visitor's register. She wrote a false name, a fake phone number, and a fake address after which she went inside the building looking for the flat the stranger had messaged her about.

Once she climbed up the stairs to reach the first floor of B-wing, she came and stood in front of flat 103, the flat where Prateek lived. Rivanah prayed hard in her mind that the stranger lived up to his promise. She stood nervously by the door

contemplating whether to press the doorbell or not. Her phone pinged with a message from an unknown number.

The key is inside the dustbin.

Rivanah looked down and saw a small dustbin by the flat's main door. Making a face she bent down and picked up the key from the almost empty dustbin. With fear forming lumps in her throat, she gently inserted the key into the keyhole. There was a slight noise as the door unlocked. She pushed the door open with the tip of her finger. It was dark inside. She took an unsure step forward and then immediately pulled out. Should she enter? She closed her eyes for once, took God's name and after a moment of resting her pacing heartbeats, advanced inside.

To the left is the switch board, the stranger messaged. Her own phone's beep scared her. Rivanah turned around to see if there was anyone behind her, watching her. There was nobody.

Extending her arm to the left, she found the switch board. She pressed all the buttons at once. The next instant, three lights in the room came on along with two ceiling fans. She saw Prateek lying on the floor in an unconscious state. He was stark naked except for a bra around his chest. Rivanah didn't know what to do. She went close to him to check if he was dead or alive. She noticed something was written on his stomach: *world's tiniest wonder*. An arrow was marked below which aimed toward his flaccid penis. Rivanah's first instinct was to laugh, acknowledging the stranger's sense of humour. But she controlled herself. She now understood why the stranger had asked her to be there. She took out her phone and made a three-minute long video of Prateek. His phone was lying beside him. Once done, she quickly kept her own phone in her bag while taking out the memory card and SIM from Prateek's phone stamped the phone out of shape. Even if he had transferred the clip somewhere

else, she now had stuff to barter and shut him up permanently. Rivanah was about to get up to leave when the lights went off. She could smell the same masculine deodorant which she once did in the elevator before. She turned around but before she could see anything, Rivanah felt someone press a cloth to her mouth from behind and within seconds she was unconscious.

Rivanah woke up when a middle-aged woman slapped her cheeks gently.

'Hello! Wake up. Can you hear me?'

She sat up and looked around to realize she was inside her apartment's elevator with no memory of how she came there. The woman who helped her lived in the same floor as her.

'Are you okay?' the woman asked.

'Yes,' Rivanah said holding her head which was mildly aching. She stumbled out of the elevator and went to her flat with the thought: did the stranger leave me in the elevator?

Ishita had gone to Matheran with a guy from her office while Asha was not there in the flat. Rivanah was dying to share the entire incident with someone, but since there was nobody at home, she kept watching the video on repeat until her stomach started cramping with all the laughing. She wanted to watch Prateek's reaction when she would show him the video in office. She was so happy that she decided to cook a new dish. Then she called her mother with whom she talked for a good one hour, the first time she had talked to her mother for so long since Ekansh left her. Her mother was immensely happy to hear her daughter speak like her old self after a long time even though she didn't know what was really happening in her life.

'Is Ekansh coming to Mumbai?' her mother asked trying to guess the reason for her sudden enthusiasm. Rivanah had never told her of his earlier visits.

'No mumma.'

‘Then what has happened? Are you getting a promotion?’ she egged on.

‘No mumma! It’s nothing. I’m just happy.’

After the phone call with her mother ended, she spoke aloud finally. ‘Thank you stranger!’ As an impulse, she immediately stared at her phone for a response. It came soon enough.

You’re welcome.

‘I think I’ll soon fall in love with you,’ she said and giggled to herself. She knew she wasn’t making any sense but she didn’t care.

You don’t know me. You can only fall in love with the illusion of me. And illusions are fragile. Illusions are breakable. Illusions are dangerous.

‘Hmm, that’s true. But really,I can’t thank you enough for this one. I want to meet you one day. Possible?’

Very much.

‘Thanks. By the way, why did you knock me out?’

Nothing is for free.

'Meaning?' An MMS came in from an unknown number. She downloaded it and played the video. It showed her capturing Prateek in the compromising position earlier in the evening. Soon her happiness turned into anger. Did the stranger record her so that she didn't backtrack on the gangrape case? Or was he planning to enslave her just like Prateek?

'You could have given me the clip or recorded Prateek yourself, but you wanted me to record him so that you could record me?' Her voice choked as she added, 'I thought you were a friend but you are no different from Prateek. In fact, you're probably worse because I don't remember doing you any wrong to deserve this.' Rivanah cursed herself to have trusted the stranger.

I never said I'm your friend.

16

The MMS showing her recording Prateek in a compromising position did mar her happiness but when Monday arrived,it brought with it a sense of excitement. Rivanah was looking forward to Prateek's reaction when she would show him the recording. She went to office early and impatiently waited for him.

When Prateek turned up, Rivanah went up to him and said, 'What happened? You didn't call me on Saturday? Not on Sunday either. I was waiting for your call.'

Her extra eager demeanour took him by surprise.

‘I...I wasn’t well actually,’ he said. ‘This coming weekend you will come to my place, okay?’

Rivanah stretched her hand and gave her phone to him.

‘What’s this?’

‘Something I recorded for you.’

Prateek thought she was going to show him something sexy. With blood rushing to his penis, he pressed the play button. For the next two minutes, he stood in a frozen position.

‘You bitch. It was you who...how did you...?’

‘You and your indecent games are over Prateek.’

She snatched the phone from him and added, ‘In case you want to play the game of online video circulation now, count me in on it too.’

Prateek wanted to say a lot more but all he managed to blabber was, ‘You...you can’t...but how...shit…’

‘I told you I was sorry to have rejected you in school. Still you had to come out with your filth,

isn't it? Now follow me like a good boy,' Rivanah said and walked away. After a few seconds he followed her to her department. His submissiveness told her their intimate clip was only on his phone and nowhere else, otherwise he wouldn't be playing meek. .

Once they reached her department, Rivanah instructed, 'Now. I want you to scream and say you are sorry.'

Prateek made a pleading face. Rivanah stood rock steady, ignoring him.

'I don't have all day,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' he said softly.

'Louder.'

'I'm sorry.'

A few colleagues turned to look at them.

'Louder,' Rivanah egged on.

'I'm sorry.'

Now almost everyone present in the room was staring at them.

‘Get lost now,’ Rivanah said. ‘If you come near me again, I shall register a case of sexual harassment against you with the higher authorities here. I should have done that on day one anyway.’

It was in the evening when Rivanah went back to her flat that she decided to share the entire smooch incident and the subsequent blackmail exchange with Ishita.

‘Did you kick his balls?’ Ishita asked. She was busy drying her nail polish, while Rivanah was choosing which nail colour to apply from her vanity box.

‘No.’

‘You should have.’

‘It’s okay. My job is done. I’m not interested in anything more.’

‘But seriously, did the stranger help you get the clip?’

‘Yes.’

‘He is such a hero.’

Rivanah thought about the MMS he had sent her and said, ‘I don’t know what he really is. I mean I don’t even know if he is even a man, if you know what I mean.’

‘Huh? What do you mean?’ Ishita looked at Rivanah for a moment and then started fanning her feet with her hand saying, ‘Of course he is a man. Don’t spoil my fantasies now. And he is a hero. He helped you out of a situation that could have fucked your life, yaar. What else do you want?’

Rivanah was tempted to think on the same lines as Ishita but after he had sent her the MMS, she was more confused than ever.

‘I don’t know. Do you know what he made me do for helping me with the clip thing?’ she said picking out a nail paint of her liking.

‘What?’ Ishita looked at her again.

‘Promise me you won’t speak about it to anyone, come what may!’ The secret was killing her and she had to share it with someone.

‘Just tell me, what is it? You are scaring me now.’

‘I’m the witness of the gangrape case that happened in Goregaon few weeks back.’

Ishita couldn’t believe her ears. ‘What the fuck! Seriously?’

Rivanah nodded saying, ‘I did witness it.’

‘You did? When?’

Rivanah took a few minutes to relay exactly what had happened when Ishita had gone to pee that night after the boring beer party leaving Rivanah alone on the street. She also apologized for not telling her about the matter before.

‘God! And now you are an eyewitness?’

‘Yes. The inspector told me I’ll have to make myself available whenever the police or the court summons me. The police have promised that my

identity won't be disclosed in front of the media or the rapists or anybody else.'

'That's such a brave thing you did, darling. I mean don't mind but I always thought you were a fattu kind of a girl but this is superwoman stuff, yaar.'

'I didn't do it of my own accord. The stranger made me do it,' Rivanah said continuing to apply the nail paint.

'That's even more interesting. He could have asked you to sleep with him like perverts do, right?'

'That's why I said I don't know who he is. He had his chance and still...' Rivanah was about to tell her roomie about the MMS when the doorbell rang.

'I'll answer it,' Ishita said and went to open the door. Rivanah waited for her to come back. When she didn't come back for almost five minutes, Rivanah called out loud, 'Ishu, who is it?'

There was no response. A few seconds later she heard the main door lock. Ishita walked into her room like a zombie.

'What happened?' Rivanah urged her.

Ishita looked at her as if all the air from her lungs had been sucked out.

'What is it Ishu? Don't scare me.'

'We have a new neighbour,' Ishita said with a straight face.

'So?'

'He came to check if we had eggs since there were none in the shops nearby.'

'So?'

'I gave him all the eggs we had.'

'What? Are you mad?'

'I wasn't. But now I'm. He was wearing a pair of black knickers and a red-black gym vest,' Ishita said lost in her thoughts.

'So what's the point?' Rivanah was piqued.

‘He is the sexiest, hottest, and the most handsome male specimen I have ever seen in my entire life. What a height, what looks, and what a presence. One look at him and I turned into a 16-year-old in an instant. I was checking him out shamelessly and I don’t care if he noticed. He looked soooo edible,’ she drooled.

‘And he is mine, okay?’ Ishita said coming out of her trance.

‘You can have him.’ Rivanah stood up and out of plain curiosity said, ‘I also want to see this hot male specimen.’

‘How?’ Ishita said and followed her.

‘Wait here,’ Rivanah said. She checked herself in the wardrobe mirror once. She was looking more than presentable in a pair of denim hot-pants and a green spaghetti top over which she had donned a black shrug.

‘He is in the exact opposite flat,’ Ishita said.

Rivanah cleared her throat before unlocking the main door and then proceeding toward the concerned flat. While she pressed the doorbell, Ishita closed their flat's main door. As seconds ticked by, Rivanah could feel the embers of curiosity form a smoke of desire in her. She pressed the doorbell again while turning to look toward her flat. The door was closed but she was sure Ishita was behind the peephole watching everything. Rivanah was about to press the doorbell for the third time when a guy pulled it open. It looked like he had just stepped out of a shower because his body was completely wet and he was naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist.

'Yes?' His voice was deep.

Rivanah swallowed a lump noticing his four-pack abs. She hadn't seen such a perfect male physique, that too in the same building as hers. He

understood she was uncomfortable so he tried to make things easy for her.

'I'm sorry I'm taking a shower right now,' he said in a polite manner.

Gosh, Ishita was right. He is hot, Rivanah thought. *Such a hot guy shouldn't take a shower alone*. Quickly thinking of an excuse, she said, 'I want your eggs.'

'Excuse me!' Rivanah couldn't believe she had jumbled up her words so bad.

'Actually,' she said,'My roomie gave you all the eggs we had. But we would need two of them if you don't mind.'

'Oh, it is perfectly fine. I told her I would only need three.'

I don't blame her, Rivanah thought, and stood there with a stupid smile on her face.

'One minute,' he said and disappeared inside. Rivanah quickly turned to give Ishita a thumbs-up sign.

‘Here,’ he said handing two eggs to her.

‘Thanks. By the way I’m Rivanah,’ she said stretching her arm.

‘I’m Danny.’

Danny what? Full name please. I need to Facebook you, Rivanah thought but couldn’t say it aloud lest she was labelled a despo. Never before had she been so eager to know more about a guy. Not even Ekansh did this to her on their first meeting.

‘See you,’ was all she said.

‘Sure. Bye.’ Danny closed the door behind her. Even before she could knock, Ishita opened the door. Rivanah came in and locked it.

‘Okay, it’s not alright. I think he can’t be yours just like that,’ Rivanah declared.

‘Bitch, I knew it!’ Ishita hissed.

‘Chances anyway are that he already has a girlfriend,’ Rivanah guessed.

‘Whatever, I’m open to competition,’ Ishita declared.

Rivanah hadn’t done such a thing before; woo a guy. With Ekansh it was love and not a going-weak-in-the-knee kind of attraction like Danny made her feel almost instantly. She had had many crushes, but most of them were celebrity crushes and there was nothing she could do about it except acting like a crazy fangirl. Danny’s wet abs, his smile, the eyes—everything flashed in front of her.

Ishita snapped her fingers in front of her face and said, ‘Are you on for competition?’

‘Like hell I’m.’ They shared a high-five and distributed the days in the week between them so that both get to woo Danny separately. Monday-Wednesday-Friday went to Ishita while Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday went to Rivanah. Sunday was common. The coming day was Wednesday.

The two met the following evening in the flat after they were back from office.

‘Any luck?’ Rivanah queried.

‘I got my information.’

‘Like what?’

‘The guy is a model, a struggling actor, and a gym freak. Goes to Full On Fitness, the one in Malad. By the way his name is Danny Abraham.’

As Ishita went in to change, Rivanah located Danny on Facebook after creating a fake profile for herself. She liked almost all his pictures, which were open to all, after having a close look at them. There was something magnetic about him. Especially the eyes; they seem to fish for her soul directly. After she logged out of Facebook, Rivanah called Full On Fitness gym and enrolled herself, ensuring that she starts working out the next day onward.

Full On Fitness was a unisex gym. She would go there right after her office. On the first day, Rivanah was taught a few stretching exercises by her trainer and then asked to hit the treadmill. It

was while running on the treadmill for ten minutes that she noticed Danny come in. Their eyes met for once and a faint smile was exchanged, but she soon understood it meant nothing. She saw him come out of the men's changing room in a pair of blue denim knickers and a black gym-vest. His body looked unbelievably chiselled with no ounce of fat anywhere. Unlike the last time she saw him in his flat when he was completely clean-shaven, his face now had a stubble which added a certain wildness to his otherwise pleasant personality.

Danny started running on another treadmill opposite to her. The two set of treadmills for men and women were kept on two opposite sides of the room facing huge mirrors against the respective walls. Rivanah could see his back in the mirror in front of her. And soon, she noticed, he was sweating. He removed his vest in no time. As sweat drops trickled from his scruff to his broad shoulders to his narrow waist, so did Rivanah's

sight. For the next half an hour, she tried to exercise but in vain since all her focus was on him.

Done with her cardio, she was waiting for her trainer to help her with the crunches but he was nowhere in sight. She didn't complain for she had a delightful distraction. Danny was pumping both his biceps with a barbell and all Rivanah could do was drool looking at the way his muscles flexed as he pulled the barbell up to his neck. *Bless the maker of this wondrous creation,* she thought. Danny kept the barbell down and was about to pick up a set of dumbbells when he noticed her standing by the treadmill doing nothing.

'Any problem?' he asked.

Lots! she thought and said, 'I need to do my sit-ups but I don't know where my trainer has gone.'

'I can help if it's okay with you.'

'Umm, sure,' she said.

She took out a floor mat from a nearby shelf and sat on it with folded legs. Danny came and pressed

his palm on her shoes to give her enough pressure so that she could sit up easily without lifting her feet. And every time she sat up, as Danny kept a count, she could smell his musky body odour, revelling in it as she lay back. She would have loved to continue but after fifteen sit-ups she could no longer lift herself up.

'First day?' Danny said.

'Yeah.'

'One more set?'

'Yeah, okay.' She would have given up had it not been for the endearing twinkle in his eyes when he asked her for another set. This time Rivanah dared to go beyond revelling in his odour. She started breathing heavy and each time their faces came close, she deliberately blew her breath on his face. Not for a single time did Danny move his face though.

After few more exercises, it was time for Rivanah to leave the gym for the day. She knew the

next day was Ishita's. She was contemplating how she should approach him when Danny came up to her.

'Hey, leaving?'

'Yeah,' she said nervously.

'Are you working somewhere?'

'Yes. In Goregaon.'

'Saw you last morning leave the building in haste,' he said with a sharp smile. She felt like a butterfly of desire was hovering in her tummy. What was this spell that imprisoned her in such an embarrassing and yet arousing manner? Rivanah wondered and said, 'What about you?'

'Don't you think this is the wrong place to answer such questions? I mean how about coffee on Saturday?'

And she knew Ishita was out of the game. 'Why not? Saturdays are my off anyway,' she said with a renewed confidence.

'Great!'

‘How do we connect?’ She hinted at him to give her his phone number. He took the hint well. Rivanah was imagining Ishita’s face when she would show Danny’s number in her phone contact list. For the first time after her break up with Ekansh, the prospect of a date excited Rivanah.

She reached her flat and was impatiently waiting for Ishita to come home from office when she received a message from the stranger.

Be free on Saturday.

Why, are you meeting me? She preferred to message back than talk aloud.

Your good luck is needed, the stranger messaged.

Good luck? What do you mean? The stranger’s words never stopped to baffle her.

I call it the ‘share your good luck’ endeavour. It was your good luck that you were born to parents who could sponsor your education. Now,

it's your turn to share the result of that good luck with children who don't have it.

Rivanah read the message a couple of times and understood the social implication of it but still missed the point.

'So?' she spoke aloud.

So, you need to go to Dahisar east on Saturday. There's a small slum there. There will be ten kids waiting for you. You'll teach them every Saturday till they learn how to write their names in English.

Good joke! I seriously don't have time. Moreover, I have other things to do than teach slum kids, Rivanah message again.

Other things like dating Danny?

'None of your business,' Rivanah cried out sounding crossed. Did this person have nothing else to do except for following her around? *Be free Mini.*

‘Why don’t you get it? I have a life of my own!’ Frustration was evident in her voice.

Why don’t YOU get it? I have a clip of yours that can be transferred to Prateek’s mobile any moment with a press of a tiny button.

Rivanah’s face contorted with disgust followed by helplessness.

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'I'm sure you resorted to black magic? Asha helped you in this, didn't she?' said Ishita when she learnt Danny himself had asked Rivanah out.

'Look I'm sorry,' Rivanah said, 'If you like him...'

'It's okay, yaar. I was not going to marry him anyway. He is only a guy. Two soul-sisters can't get mad with each other because of a guy,' she winked at Rivanah and continued, 'But tell me something seriously: do you like him? I mean like really "like" him? You know what I mean.'

'I think I do. For the first time after my break-up, I feel like giving it a try. But I'm scared too. Like

should I really give it a try? What if we too break-up later?'

'First, stop thinking about the future all the time. That's one thing we girls do wrong. The moment we come across a desirable guy, we start knitting the possibility of a future with him. For us, it's always the destination in a relationship. But thinking about the future with someone only begets false expectations. And you know what harm expectations can do. Supposing you didn't expect Ekansh to be loyal to you, it wouldn't have hurt you as much as it did otherwise. Obviously you would have left him then too, but I guess you got my point.'

Rivanah nodded as Ishita said, 'So, don't think, don't expect and see where it goes. I guess you'll know it yourself when the time is right to think about the future.'

'Hmm, I guess you are right. I'm just twenty-two. Why should the future bother me so much?

Thanks darling.'

The girls hugged.

A day after was Saturday. By then she had forgotten what the stranger had asked her to do. Danny called her in the morning and said he was already out because of a film audition and would wait for her in the food court of Infinity Mall in Andheri, west, around 12:30 in the afternoon for he had another audition in the evening. Rivanah promised him she would be on time but the Mumbai traffic made sure she was half an hour late.

'I'm so sorry,' she said the moment she walked up to him in the food court of the mall. They took a seat by the Subway outlet instead of Gloria's as planned.

'Don't mind but I'm a bit hungry. Can we update the coffee thing to a quick lunch?' Danny asked.

Rivanah smiled and said, 'Please! Even I'm hungry.'

Danny went to Subway and bought two 6-inch subs.

'Here you go. Do you need anything else?' he asked.

'Nope!' she said drawing one tray toward herself.

'How long have you been in Mumbai?' he asked.

'Been around eight months. What about you?'

'Close to three years now.'

'How long have you been a model?'

Danny frowned at her. 'How do you know?' he asked.

'Err, my roomie told me,' Rivanah answered. She couldn't help but portray an amused face. His smile told her he understood.

'I've been modelling for small products and print ads in local newspapers and magazines. Nothing big.'

'And you want to be an actor too?'

‘An actor is always an actor. What I aim to be is an employed actor,’ he said munching the sandwich.

It started as a Q and A session, turned to a discourse mid-way and before they realized it, they were having a warm and honest heart-to-heart conversation. With every piece of information they were divulging, Rivanah found the colour of her liking toward him getting darker. Her first opinion about Danny was that he was at one level a simple, sombre, disciplined person and yet there was a sublime wildness about him which could lure any girl to the cave of sin. His eyes had a sexual longing in them. Also, the way he looked at her...it was never a casual look. Once they were done with the sandwiches, Danny received a message on his phone. Rivanah watched dejection perch on his face. She wanted to inquire if the message was from his girlfriend. She wouldn’t have cared for this question if it was the first time she was

interested in a guy. She didn't want someone in her life anymore who would give her divided attention. And she definitely didn't want to invest emotionally in a committed guy. She wanted a person who would respect her presence in his life, who would be honest with her, who would not continue to waste her time even after being done with her. Too good to be real?

'What happened?' she asked.

'I had booked two tickets for a movie. But now she says she won't be able to come.'

If Rivanah's heart was a calm sea till then the word 'she' was thrown at her like a boulder. Was it over with Danny even before it had started?

'She as in? Your girlfriend?' Her heart was praying to hear a no.

'No. My bestie Nitya,' he said.

Rivanah heaved a sigh of relief. *A girl best friend,* Rivanah thought, *that's manageable.* She didn't want to tell him directly that she was free

for the day and would love to watch the film with him.

'What are you doing after this?' he asked.

'Umm,' Rivanah feigned thinking about it and said, 'Actually...nothing much.'

'Do you mind joining me for the movie?'

Rivanah deliberately waited for a few seconds to show she was not so eager.

'Okay, yes…I think I can squeeze in time for a movie.'

Danny flashed her a warm smile. Rivanah had a good feeling about it all.

During interval, Danny went to fetch a bucket of popcorn while she went to the washroom. She came back to see Danny talking on the phone outside the theatre's entrance. He gave her the popcorn bucket and asked her to go inside, telling her he would join her soon. She complied. Rivanah went inside and made herself comfortable in her seat, dipping her hand into the bucket of popcorn.

Along with a handful of popcorn came out a piece of white cloth, surprising her. She switched on her phone's flashlight and saw a message was stitched on it with black thread:

Don't piss me off Mini.

Rivanah immediately stood up, looking around for the stranger and then realized she didn't even know whom to look for. Danny joined her and found it weird that she was standing.

'Looking for someone?' he said taking his seat.

'Nay!' she said and immediately typed a message on her phone:

Stop bugging me. I'm trying to enjoy myself.

Rivanah was burning with rage. As she sent the message to the last unknown number the stranger had messaged her from, she panned her sight hoping to see if anyone looked at his or her phone. The next second, she let out a sigh of despair. It was useless. She wouldn't spot the stranger like this.

‘Something’s wrong?’ Danny asked.

‘No, nothing.’ She flashed him an unconvincing smile. The lights slowly went off and the movie started. Rivanah’s phone vibrated with a message: *Okay, let’s enjoy the movie as of now.*

Damn! He is in this theatre, she thought, and still she could not get to him. While moving out, Rivanah did try to register as many faces as she could but soon started forgetting the initial ones. In the end, she accepted the futility of it.

Days passed but there wasn’t any more communication from the stranger. She knew what he asked of her was not a bad thing but who would take the pain of going to a slum every Saturday to teach some kids? It all sounded good on paper but the reality was that Rivanah wanted to enjoy her life too. Weekends were the only time she felt alive after the five brutal office days. And more so since the time Danny had stepped into her life.

The good thing about Danny's line of work was that he didn't have any formal office timings. Sometimes he dropped in during her lunch and many a times she waited for him in the office after work hours and left with him. On weekends they would go out for movies, clubbing, shopping etc. Since they were neighbours, there were times when she felt they were literally living-in together. Danny was a natural when it came to messing up his flat while Rivanah took it upon herself to arrange everything. They were getting emotionally close and it was happening fast. It scared her. Was it her own emotions that rebelled because she was trying to move on from Ekansh and create a space for someone else that had earlier been occupied by Ekansh? She had no answer. Worse was she couldn't ask Danny about it. When they had a discussion about the number of people they had in their respective lives, Danny was quick to respond: five, while she said it was only one,

Ekansh. Rivanah couldn't understand how someone could move on so easily? Five relationships meant he must have had to move on five times and here she was finding it difficult to move on from the hangover of one single relationship. Was it that he never loved any of the five girls truly or was it that she loved Ekansh a little too much than necessary?

Soon Rivanah started getting insecure and more possessive about Danny than was necessary. She made sure whenever Danny didn't look, she checked his mobile phone for suspicious messages, checked his pockets, and even sniffed his clothes for any foreign fragrance. She had never done all these things with Ekansh. Probably that's why she never saw it coming when he cheated on her. Even when she saw Danny's pictures with his best friend Nitya, it made her uncomfortable, but she never took it up with Danny. Even if she had to draw a comparison, she knew well Danny was a better human being than Ekansh. Danny, for one, had no

strict emotional uniform for her like they do in most relationships. I-want-you-to-be-like-this; that's the phantasmal emotional uniform people make their partner wear—directly or indirectly. Unlike Ekansh, Danny never asked her to show him her phone or pester her about her Facebook password or inquire about unnecessary details if she attended an event with her male colleagues. He never asked her to change her dressing style if she wore a dress that was revealing or asked a single question if she went to a nightclub with Ishita. In the end she concluded Danny wasn't insecure about her. It was enough for him that Rivanah was there for him, beside him. Nothing more worried him. He took her along to his shoots whenever she was free where she could sense he repelled temptation in the form of gorgeous girls he shot with. And yet, in a tiny corner of her heart she still fanned a possibility where Danny could cheat on her. And the culprit of such a compulsive nesting of

this cheap possibility was not her but what she shared with Ekansh and how it was broken. The biggest damage that Ekansh did with that one choice of his was snatch away the innocence out of her system; once and for all. Though she did seek that innocence in whatever Danny and she shared, Rivanah knew she would never get it. Not even a hint of it. Some things are irreversible in life. It was sad but it was the truth.

One night Rivanah was all alone in her flat, experiencing a bout of depression, when she suddenly spoke up loudly, 'Are you there?'

A blank message popped up on her mobile screen from an unknown number. She understood it was an indication of the stranger's willingness to listen.

'Thanks,' she said and continued, 'You know how Ekansh and I ended. Do you think whatever we shared until then was not love at all?'

Love doesn't always happen to strengthen our beliefs. Sometimes it happens to destroy all our previous beliefs and faith and gives us a chance to re-look at our own conclusions.

'I can't tell you how much I burn every time I'm told by myself that Ekansh and I couldn't make it.'

Some relationships don't have roots but you still expect them to blossom into fruits and flowers. Why?

'I think you are right. But can you please tell me why I can't love Danny the way I loved Ekansh? I want to but there's this emotional vertigo that scares me all the time which wasn't there with Ekansh.' She kept staring at her phone. A reply came after a minute.

Can apple and orange taste the same?

'I know they can't but I'm still not able to come to terms with the fact that Ekansh still resides in my heart while I'm pursuing a relationship with Danny. We haven't proposed to each other but I

have special feelings for him and I know he harbours the same feelings for me. But Ekansh is still alive within me.'

The reply from the stranger was an address. The message ended with: (*do visit alone if you want to find an answer)*.

The address was very close to where she lived. Out of plain curiosity and in search for her answer, as the stranger had said, Rivanah strolled to the address during daytime the next day, a Sunday. It was a slightly dilapidated apartment. According to the address given to her, she was supposed to visit the third floor to flat numbered 302. Once there Rivanah pressed the doorbell. A middle-aged lady soon opened the door.

'You must be Rivanah Bannerjee?' she said with a strong Bengali accent. The fact that the lady was expecting her surprised Rivanah. Then a thought struck her: is this where the stranger lives?

'Yes,' Rivanah said to the lady.

‘Please come in,’ the lady said and opened the iron-gate ahead of the wooden door. Rivanah entered the flat. The sight of the lady had washed away all the apprehensions in her mind. It was a small flat and its contents told her it belonged to someone from a middle class background.

‘Please sit,’ the lady said. ‘Oh, by the way I’m Malati Raha.’

‘Nice to meet you ma’am,’ Rivanah said and sat down on an old looking couch whose cover was torn at places.

‘I was told that you would be coming.’

‘Who told you?’

‘It’s weird but we don’t know the person who changed our life by name or face. Ratna calls him captain miracle.’

‘Captain Miracle?’ Rivanah repeated.

‘He connects with Ratna through emails.’

Rivanah was sure it had to be the stranger.

‘Come let me take you to Ratna. I was asked to introduce you to her,’ Malati said and went inside. Rivanah stood up with an air of uncertainty and followed her in. The bedroom was smaller than the drawing room and seemed stuffy. By the window sat a young girl who had a smile on her face that spoke of strength and honesty. Rivanah guessed she should be at most fifteen-sixteen.

‘This is my daughter Ratna. My only child,’ Malati said.

Rivanah smiled at her and forwarded her hand and said, ‘Hi Ratna. I’m Rivanah.’

When her hand met hers, Rivanah understood it was an artificial hand. A quick glance and she noticed the other hand too was artificial. Rivanah felt a knot in her stomach. She had never seen an artificial hand so closely before. ‘She and her father were coming to Mumbai from Kolkata on May 28, 2010 in Jnaneswari Express when the train derailed. Ratna’s father died while her hands

had to be amputated in order to pull her out of the debris.'

For a moment, Rivanah felt a lump in her throat. When she spoke she said, 'How...how old is she now?'

'I'm eighteen,' Ratna said. Her voice was sweet and without any sorrow.

'Thanks to her captain miracle we could afford these artificial limbs,' Malati said.

'Is the person a male?' Rivanah queried.

Ratna and Malati exchanged a blank look.

'Male. I have had a voice call with him over the internet once but we haven't seen him as yet,' Ratna said.

'But then, we don't see God as well,' Malati added caressing her daughter's forehead.

Rivanah managed a smile. Ratna told her about her dream to be an IAS officer. She showed her the sketches she had made before losing her arms. As she spoke, Rivanah could sense how faithful Ratna

still was toward life. The accident had changed her life but couldn't touch her spirit. She wanted to hug her tight once but didn't. Sympathizing with such a strong soul would be insulting her.

Malati went into the kitchen to prepare some tea for her but Rivanah requested her not to, excused herself, and left. She could sense something was building up inside her. On her way back, she climbed the lonely skywalk, sat down on an empty seat, and started sobbing. She knew the reason but was too ashamed to admit it to herself. Meeting with Ratna had made her feel insignificant and her problems as unimportant. Her phone buzzed with a message from an unknown number. Wiping her tears away, Rivanah read the message:

Do you think Ratna can ever forget what happened to her for no fault of hers? Understand this Mini: we all are designed to remember things. So, if you try to forget, you will suffer. Accept and you shall shine like never before. The

greatest lesson love can give you is how to live a complete life by accepting its incomplete ways. If you can't hope in love, you can't live.

Thanks, she replied back.

Accidents happen Mini but that doesn't mean you stop travelling, the stranger messaged again.

She stared at the message and sometime later left the spot with a new sense of determination.

The incident almost gave a new lease of life to her feelings for Danny. Those bestselling concepts that she had read in romance novels during her teens about love happening only once slowly faded away from prominence. There was more to life and real love than those bestselling gibberish. She understood as human beings we love to read about and accept those things as real which made us feel good about ourselves even if it is far from the truth. And when that far-from-truth meets the real truth in the real world we suffer realizing the huge gap between the two. Ekansh is Ekansh. Danny is

Danny. Ekansh was past. Danny is present. And why would her love for them feel the same? Why would she seek night in day and day in night and not live the day and night as they individually are? Her feelings for Danny grew stronger once he proposed to her on phone. He was out for a photo shoot and she was at home that Friday night when he called her unexpectedly.

'Hey, what happened? No shoot?' she asked.

'The photographer has some work. And I'm starving,' Danny said.

'Then why don't you take a break and eat something?' Rivanah suggested.

'How do I? My food is not here?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I'm starving of you, Rivanah. I'm missing you like hell.' There was a genuine restlessness in his voice that hit her emotionally. It was for the first time that Danny was being so

direct about his feelings with her and she didn't know how to exactly react.

'Say something!' he insisted.

'Like what?'

'Like...I love you?'

'I love you,' she blurted on an impulse and realized they were officially in a relationship.

'I love you too Rivanah. I was so waiting to tell you this since the time I first saw you!'

'With that towel around your waist? Liar!'

'I swear.'

'Then why did you choose to say this over phone?'

'We have been so close friends from some time now and I wasn't sure how you would react. So...'

'Really? Then come home tomorrow after your shoot and I'll show you my reaction.'

'I'm sorry if...' Danny turned serious but his words were cut short by her.

‘We talk next when you come home tomorrow.’ And the line was cut with a giggle that soon turned in to a blush as she looked at herself in the wardrobe mirror right ahead of her. She could sense rain-laden clouds hovering above the sky of her heart. Will it rain true love finally?

The next day was a Saturday and Rivanah promised herself that she would make it the best Saturday for the two of them. The first thing she did that morning was go to the parlour. Then she bought herself a new outfit from Zara after which she bought some vegetables, some chicken, and a few candles from Hyper City. Before she started cooking in the evening, she took out a condom from Ishita’s wardrobe and put it in her bag. Though her roommates would be home at night, Danny and she would use his place. While taking out the condom she noticed a strip of I-pills as well. She cut out one tablet and kept it with herself just in case. Once the cooking was done, she dolled herself up

for Danny. She kept messaging him every hour to know his location but didn't take his call to increase the sexual itch in him which was creating an ache in her privates as well. At around ten, the doorbell rang. Danny! Rivanah sprinted to the door with a naughty smile. When she opened the door, every ounce of naughtiness vanished from her face.

'Mumma?'

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‘What are you doing here?’ Rivanah said rubbing her eyes hoping that she was dreaming. She was not.

‘Are you going to let us get in or not?’ Mrs Bannerjee said. A quick glance over her shoulder and Rivanah saw her father come out of the elevator with two heavy bags.

‘Sorry mumma,’ she said and gave her mother a hug. Then she moved aside to let her mother in the flat. As her father came to the door, she hugged him praying hard Danny didn’t turn up now. She quickly closed the door once her father stepped inside.

‘How is your health Mini?’ Mrs Bannerjee asked.

‘My health?’ Rivanah was confused.

‘Why else do you think we came here?’ Mr Bannerjee said keeping the bags on the floor.

‘One of your friends called us and said you were terribly sick and couldn’t even take our calls. Your baba took an urgent leave to come here.’

‘Why didn’t you guys call me?’

‘We were told you are too serious to take our calls. But you seem alright.’ Mr Bannerjee touched her forehead with his palm to check for fever. Then he noticed her dress and make-up and added, ‘In fact more than alright.’

‘One second,’ she said and rushed to grab her phone. She wanted to inform Danny not to come to her flat. But before she could call him, she noticed a message from an unknown number was waiting for her:

Messing your life is easy.

Rivanah immediately understood who this 'friend' of hers was and why exactly her parents had been summoned: to complicate the situation.

'Which friend of mine called up?' she asked.

'Your roommate Ishita,' Mr Bannerjee said.

Rivanah didn't dig further. She was sure it wasn't Ishita. Must be some random girl the stranger had employed to call her parents up, she thought.

'Anyway, what happened to you Mini? You know all along the flight I was praying to Baba Loknath. I was so tensed,' said Mrs Bannerjee coming to her.

'Food poisoning,' Rivanah lied and added, 'But now I'm perfectly fine.'

'Thanks to Baba Loknath,' her mother said and touched Rivanah's forehead with her palm. 'Joy Baba Loknath,' she mumbled to herself.

'When are you leaving?' Rivanah asked. The longer they would stay, the more uncomfortable

things would get.

Both her parents gaped at her.

'We are seeing you after so many months, Mini. You should ask us how the journey was, if we want to drink water or not, and here you are asking our return date instead? I don't know what's up with your generation. No sense of attachment at all,' her mother complained and went to sit on the bed in the drawing room.

'No mumma, it's not that!' Rivanah went to her, kissed her on the cheeks, and hugged her tight saying, 'I was asking so that I could apply for leave. Actually an important project is going on in office so I need to inform them at the earliest to get a leave.'

'Don't tell your mother about office leaves. She won't get it,' her father added sitting down clumsily on one of the beanbags. 'By the way why are you so dressed up?'

'I was out with friends. Just came back.'

‘You are looking pretty but I think you have lost weight,’ said her mother kissing her on her cheeks.

‘Oh mumma,I told you I have joined the gym.’

Her mother caressed her daughter’s forehead lovingly.

‘Don’t you have proper chairs, Mini? This is so...’ Mr Bannerjee was finding it difficult to sit on the beanbag.

‘I’ll get some water for you,’ Rivanah said and went to the kitchen. The doorbell rang. And she face palmed. Informing Danny escaped her because of the stranger’s message. Before she could move out, her father had opened the door. Rivanah stood frozen by the kitchen door hoping it wasn’t Danny.

‘Yes?’ Mr Bannerjee said looking at Danny.

‘Is Rivanah here?’

‘Who are you?’ Mr Bannerjee asked as if he was the investigative officer of an important case.

‘I’m her boyfriend,’ Danny said.

Rivanah could have collapsed in the kitchen itself. *It's a dream, it's a dream. Please someone wake me up,* she told herself. She heard her father call her name out. She went outside and smiled uncertainly at her father first and then at Danny.

'Hi Danny! Meet my parents,' she said.

'Danny?' Her father looked at his daughter once and then at the guy. He was still the investigative officer.

'Hello uncle. Hello aunty.'

Mr Bannerjee only nodded his head acknowledging the greeting while Mrs Bannerjee gave him a warm smile.

'One second,' Rivanah said and went to her wardrobe in the drawing room itself.

'What do you do Danny?' Mr Bannerjee asked.

'I'm a model and an actor, uncle.'

'Model and an actor?' Mr Bannerjee frowned as if Danny had said he was an alien.

Rivanah came back quickly with a key and gave it to Danny.

'Here, we'll talk later,' she said. Danny took the keys and left. Rivanah closed the door behind.

'He lives here?' her father asked.

'Let me bring your water baba,' she said.

'Answer me first Mini.'

'Yes.'

'What's his full name?'

'Danny Abraham.'

Her parents exchanged a worrisome look as if they had just discovered their daughter had been infected with a deadly virus.

'Where is Ekansh?' her mother asked. 'He was such a good guy. Though Danny looks better than him.'

'One minute,' her father cut short her mother. 'Is it true that he is your boyfriend?'

Rivanah was quiet.

‘Answer me young lady—where is Ekansh?’ Her father’s voice was strict.

It took Rivanah a few minutes to tell them under what circumstances Ekansh and she had broken up. She went and embraced her mother who had tears in her eyes.

‘I don’t know why bad things happen to my daughter,’ she said and kept crying.

‘It’s okay mumma. Things like these happen. They are beyond our control. Plus it’s not like Ekansh and I were married,’ she said. Her mother caressed her daughter’s face.

‘But why Danny?’ her father interrupted.

‘Why not baba?’

‘Firstly he is not from our religion and secondly he is a model and an actor.’

‘So? Like I’m a software engineer, he is an actor.’

‘You can’t trust actors Mini.’ Mr Bannerjee took his seat on the beanbag again and said, ‘Even his

arms are waxed. It looks so strange. Also, I remember a guy like him had destroyed a girl's life once.'

'Which guy? Which girl?' Rivanah was confused.

'I saw it in *Crime Patrol*.'

'Baba, please! Danny is a good boy. We love each other.'

'Where's your room? I need to take rest,' her father said sulking further.

Rivanah looked at her mother who gave her an assuring look. Her parents stayed on for two more days. On one of the days, Rivanah managed to take them out for Mumbai darshan and on the second day the mother and daughter went out for shopping in Colaba causeway. Mr Bannerjee stayed back in her flat snooping around her daughter's wardrobe. The kind of dresses and accessories he saw told him that it was time to accept that times have changed, that a daughter no longer needed a

different protocol to live her life than a son. He was surprised to see a bottle of Black Dog in her wardrobe. He took it up with her when she came back with her mother in the evening.

'Have you started drinking Mini?' he said displaying the bottle of Black Dog in his hand as if it was a prized discovery of his.

'This is Ishita's. The girl who called you up, remember?'

'Where is she?' he asked.

They did meet Asha a day before but Ishita had not turned up for three days straight. She had told her before that she was going to Goa with a couple of guys.

'She has gone home. Actually she had bought it for her father but forgot to take it with her,' Rivanah lied with an expertise that impressed her own self.

'But why your wardrobe?'

‘There’s no my or her wardrobe baba. We share things. She isn’t just a roommate now but a friend too.’

‘Hmm.’ Mr Bannerjee wasn’t convinced.

That night her mother insisted she invite Danny over for dinner.

‘If they talk more, your baba will get to know him better and things will ease out. I like Danny. He looks so much like Uttam Kumar,’ her mother said with a grin.

‘Every good looking guy looks like Uttam Kumar to you. Uttam Kumar never had muscles mumma. Say Salman Khan,’ Rivanah pointed out.

‘*Oyi holo!’*

Rivanah kissed her mother hard on the cheeks and Whatsapped Danny to come over for dinner.

He pressed the doorbell right on time. The dinner lasted for a good twenty minutes and every minute of it was a disaster as far as bonding between Danny and Mr Bannerjee went. For every

question that Mr Bannerjee threw at Danny, he gave her an honest answer. That only made the matter worse.

'What do your parents do?' Mr Bannerjee asked.

'My father is a chef in Hong Kong. And my mother is an investment banker in New York.'

'That's nice. But how do they manage with such a long distance between them? It must be difficult.'

'Not really. They live with their respective partners,' Danny quipped. Mr Bannerjee choked on his food. Rivanah gave him a glass of water that he drank in one go.

'Are you the only child?'

'No. We are five brothers. The eldest one is absconding and I really don't know why. I haven't seen him since a decade now. The second one is at a rehab centre in the US for drug abuse. The third works in a hotel in Dubai while the fourth has become a lama and stays in Tibet. I'm the youngest,' he said.

That was the last time Mr Bannerjee spoke to Danny. Mrs Bannerjee on the other hand asked him about all her favourite film stars and whether he had been to Dilip Kumar's or Amitabh Bachchan's or her all time crush Dharmendra's bungalows.

'Mumma,' Rivanah said, 'Danny is still struggling to get a break. How can he go to the bungalows of these legends just like that?'

'But I have seen Emraan Hashmi up close, aunty,' Danny added with pride.

'Who?' Mrs Bannerjee looked for help at Rivanah.

'Serial kisser,' Mr Bannerjee replied and excused himself. He was done with the dinner. He didn't talk much with his daughter after Danny left.

The next day Rivanah dropped them off at the airport.

'Whatever you do, think about the repercussions. Marriage is a serious thing.' It was all her father told her. She gave him a warm hug and said, 'Don't

worry baba. I won't do anything that will put you to shame. And Danny and I haven't discussed marriage yet.'

'Just like Ekansh and you had not discussed it either,' her father said. He glanced at her mother and added, 'That's why our generation was better. We married and discussed other possibilities. And today youngsters live all the other possibilities and break-up even before discussing marriage.'

Rivanah shot her mother a helpless look.

'If only Danny was Danny Ganguly or Danny Mukherjee or...' mother lamented. When her parents went inside the airport, Rivanah relaxed for the first time in three days. The first thing she did was text the stranger.

What do you want from me? She was pissed off at him for having called her parents to her place and putting her relationship with Danny under constraint.

Be free next Saturday. The kids are waiting, the stranger replied.

For how long do I need to do that before you delete that clip of mine? she asked.

You will continue with it till the time it doesn't become your habit. And don't worry about the clip. If you lend me your ears, I shall lend you peace, the stranger responded.

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The following Saturday Rivanah went to the slum pocket in Dahisar east along with Danny. He didn't understand why exactly she was doing what she was doing.

'It is part of an office project of mine,' Rivanah said. She knew if she told Danny about the circumstances that pushed her to visit the place, she would have to tell him about the stranger. If she told him about the stranger, she would have to tell him about the clip. With the clip Prateek would come into the context. If Prateek came in, so would Ekansh because it was after the break-up that she started going out with Prateek. She would have to

do a lot of explaining which she wasn't ready to do. After Ekansh she didn't feel it was right to be an open book in front of one's partner. A personal space was always necessary, it didn't matter how much you love someone. Moreover Rivanah and Danny were only in the February of their relationship.

'What is the project called?' Danny asked.

'It's called share-your-good-luck. Since I was born to well off parents who could sponsor my education, now I need to impart that good luck to ten kids and help them learn to write their names in English.'

Danny looked at her admiringly and said, 'Wow! You don't stop to impress me girl.'

Rivanah gave him a hug. They soon reached the place and the first thing they noticed was that it wasn't exactly a proper slum but a single line of twelve-thirteen shanties. As she stood clueless about her next action, a kid came running up to her

and said in Hindi with a heavy Marathi accent, 'Are you Rivanah tai?' He was wearing a fresh white shirt and a pair of blue half-pants.

Rivanah exchanged a furtive glance with Danny and said, 'Yes.'

'Please come with me,' The kid said and turned to walk on.

'The kids know about you?' Danny said perplexed.

'So it seems,' Rivanah said and followed the kid to a nearby place—a square piece of sheltered space that looked like a godown. On one side a heap of watermelons were kept while on the other side, a few kids were sitting with folded legs; six girls and four boys wearing the same outfit as the kid who brought them there. A smile appeared on their faces seeing Rivanah. The boy who brought her went ahead and sat down beside the other kids. A moment later, Danny too went and sat behind the kids folding his legs just like them. There was a

hush-hush laughter. For Rivanah, it was the first time that she was going to teach. All her life she had been taught things. Being on the other side of the line, she felt different in an intriguing and powerful way. As she went and stood in front of the students, she noticed there was a blackboard beside her. All eyes were on her. All the kids seemed to come from below poverty line. The only thing that stood out in their appearance was their brand new uniform. It was while looking at the dress of one of the students that she noticed the emblem for the first time. She gestured that particular kid to come up to her. The girl stood up and went to Rivanah. On her shirt's pocket, she could see a smiley was stitched in a way as if it was an emblem. At the centre of it was stitched: *Mini's Magic 10*. A faint smile touched her face reading it.

'What's your name?' She asked the kid.

'Divya,' The girl said.

‘How old are you?’

Divya started counting on her fingers and then said ‘Nine’ in Hindi. Rivanah tapped her cheek lovingly and asked her to go and sit.

It was the first day so Rivanah hadn’t come prepared with anything. She asked the kids their names and asked them a few general questions to test their IQ. They were sharp kids; she concluded. That’s when she felt nice to be a part of the stranger’s ‘share your good luck’ endeavour. A little time on her part wouldn’t really take much from her life but it would, she now knew, give a lot to the kids in the long run. It was one of those rare moments where she felt she was doing something worthwhile. She arranged for the kids to have chocolates from a nearby shop and told them that from next Saturday she would start teaching them properly. Their smile told her that they liked her.

‘I didn’t know you were so good with kids,’ Danny said while returning to their place.

‘Even I didn’t know myself,’ she said.

‘Sitting in the class,’ Danny said, ‘I had a feeling that if we all are committed to small things like this, only then can a big and positive change happen.’

Rivanah couldn’t agree more.

‘What after these kids learn to write their names?’ Danny asked.

Rivanah looked at him but realized she had no answer. *The stranger must have a plan after that,* she thought, and sent him a message right then.

What after the kids learn to write their names?

It was when Danny was paying the autorickshaw fare that the reply came:

They will start going to a government school. That’s my way of sharing the good luck I was born with.

‘What are you smiling at?’ Danny asked as the auto left.

‘Nothing,’ she said reading the message aloud and went inside the building with him.

‘Danny, do you think we all are striving in lives in our own little ways to derive more than what we need to live a decent life? Maybe 99 percent of the time, we don’t need something and are still ready to die to procure it in order to either stand out from the others or stand in with them?’ she said when they were in the elevator.

‘Why do you ask??’ he said.

She immediately knew she shouldn’t have asked him this.

‘Nothing. Just leave it?’

‘I think,’ he said, ‘It’s an individual who decides how much he needs. This thing called need is subjective, right? Sometimes we confuse need and necessity, I guess.’

‘Necessity is common to all but need is person-specific. Like a simple kurti would pacify my necessity of covering up but a kurti from BIBA

would satisfy my need for affluent brands, of looking high-maintenance. The latter is an innate need for city-bred girls like me who grow amid a bombardment of advertisements, fashion, and materialism.' A pause later she added, 'Though for some, necessity and need is one and the same thing and that's when we lose our depth I guess.'

'We lose our worth,' Danny corrected her. The word 'worth' reminded her of one of stranger's early messages: *Know your worth Mini.*

If Rivanah was honest with herself, then the untouched and pure faces of the kids that day actually made her realize maybe she did take a little more than what she needed to live in peace. And to top it, she also took her need to be a necessity.

'It's the same in show-business,' Danny said.

'I think every business is show-business today, if you know what I mean. We are taught Moral Science lessons in junior school but it is Market

Science that we need to handle all our life as a grown up.'

'Actually!' Danny agreed.

The next Saturday Danny had a shoot for a print advertisement and so he couldn't accompany her. This time Rivanah went with ten fresh alphabet books and distributed them among the kids along with basic stationery like pencils, erasers, and pencil-cutters. Teaching those kids connected her to an unprecedented freedom in her which allowed her to forget herself, her irks, and her own complaints from life. She felt like floating when she was with *Mini's Magic 10* whereas otherwise she fought hard to swim in the sea of life.

Rivanah also made sure she interacted with the kids beyond her academic involvement. She asked those kids about their background, where they came from and also listened to their innocent dreams. One kid had an alcoholic good-for-nothing father and a mother who worked hard cleaning

people's houses and all he dreamt of was to see his mother spend twenty-four hours with him. A girl had both her parents working hard as daytime labourers at a construction site and she believed they were actually building a palace for her because she was their princess. Their aspirations, their zeal, and their will to smile amidst their grave reality taught Rivanah more than she taught them. She could forget neither the kids nor their stories. Over weeks, they became a part of her.

'I wish I could make you meet my kids?' she told her mother one night over phone.

'Your kids?' Her mother sounded scandalized.

'The ones I teach mumma.'

'You gave me a heart attack. First you changed from Ekansh to Danny and now suddenly these kids.' Her mother tried to calm herself down.

'I didn't change Ekansh. It didn't work out. Anyway.'

‘I’m happy you are teaching poor kids. Last week your pishi and pisha had come with Mou and Bunty. I told them that you do a lot of things in Mumbai like working in an American-based company and teach poor kids as well.’

‘Why do you have to advertise what I do to everyone?’ Rivanah sounded crossed.

‘What’s the harm? People should know about it.’

Rivanah knew that the real reason behind such advertisement was to project her as someone better than her cousins.

‘Do you know why they were here?’ Mrs Bannerjee asked sounding mischievous.

‘Who? Pishi and Pisha? Why?’

‘Yes, yes. They were here to invite us for Mou’s wedding.’

‘Mou’s wedding? What are you saying? She is only...’

‘Twenty!’ her mother said completing her sentence. ‘But they said they got a bright boy who

is working in Singapore and is from a good family so they couldn't say no. In fact your pishi was taunting that Mou is getting married before you.'

'I don't care how much she taunts me but I'm not getting married so don't ask me about it either.'

'Alright I won't. Do what you feel like but come down for Mou's marriage in February, okay?'

'Yeah, okay.'

'By the way who gave you the idea of teaching the kids Mini?' her mother asked. It was then she realized she hadn't talked to the stranger for some weeks now.

'A friend,' she said and quickly added, 'I'll call you later mumma.' She cut the line and typed on her phone: *Thanks*. She sent it to the stranger's last unknown number.

What for? prompt came the reply.

By now Rivanah had stopped being baffled at the prompt responses.

For letting me teach the kids. It's one of the best things that has happened to me, she messaged back.

I told you before. I'm not important, you are.

Why do you say that? Why am I so important to you?

Not to me. You are important to yourself.

Everyone is important to his or her own self.

But not everyone knows it. All our life we destroy and waste ourselves the most.

Why don't you show yourself? I would really appreciate it if you meet me once. Like seriously.

No reply came for two hours. Then five minutes before midnight, her phone beeped with a message from an unknown number:

Meet me tomorrow at Tiger Point in Lonavla. 8 pm sharp.

Tomorrow is my birthday! she messaged back immediately.

No more reply came.

Answer me.

Still no reply. Rivanah wondered if the stranger really meant what he said. Was he actually going to meet her?

At 12 am sharp, Danny called her.

'Happy birthday babe.'

'Thanks baby.'

'Sorry, I couldn't be with you right now but let's plan something for tomorrow.'

If the stranger really was going to meet her this time, she wouldn't let the opportunity go for anybody.

'Umm, baby actually I need to go for an office meet to Pune tomorrow. Can we please meet the day after? I know it's my birthday but this office thing…' Rivanah was upset about lying to Danny but she thought she would tell him everything once she met the stranger. An instinct told her if she took Danny with her, the stranger may not reveal himself.

‘Oh! But I thought we would have fun and...’

‘We definitely would baby. Don’t be sad. It’s just a matter of one day. Even I’ll miss you.’ Rivanah consoled Danny and convinced him they would party whole night once she was back. He agreed. She had to end the call sooner than she would have liked because her parents’ call was on waiting. She took their call and birthday wishes. On a whim she checked her message, whatsapp, Facebook, and email. Last year Ekansh had flooded her Facebook inbox, Whatsapp, and email with all sorts of birthday messages, e-cards but this year there was nothing. Suddenly she realized Ekansh wasn’t there in her life anymore. She was finding it difficult to accept the fact that from now onward he won’t ever wish her on her birthday. For reasons unknown to her, she logged on to her Facebook account from her laptop and unblocked Ekansh after a long time. She wanted to give him a chance to get to her if he wished to on this day.

Rivanah checked his profile picture on Facebook once and immediately logged out.

Rivanah was thankful that her roommates where not there to wish her. It was her first birthday where she just wanted to be by herself. Since the break-up Ekansh, more than just being a past, had become an experience for her. And when someone becomes an experience, it becomes difficult to severe oneself from it.

The next day, after Rivanah learnt that Danny would be at his flat in the afternoon, she moved out early lest he saw her at her flat instead of the false office meeting she told him about. She hired a cab early in the evening which drove her to Tiger Point. Just to be safe, she had messaged Ishita before leaving.

I'm going to Tiger Point in Lonavla to meet the stranger. Don't tell anybody.

OMG! Best of luck girl. Be safe, Ishita replied.

When Rivanah stepped out of the cab, she could still see tourists loitering around the point clicking pictures and having fun among themselves. As per the deal, the cab was supposed to wait till ten after which it would take her back to Mumbai. The driver moved out while she went to sit on a plastic stool by a small shop selling corn. She passed her time by receiving calls wishing her birthday from distant friends and relatives and then answering messages on Facebook. She kept refreshing her Facebook inbox, but no message came from Ekansh. Feeling stupid to have unblocked him, she blocked him again. With time, the other tourists went away and the corn stall too shut down. By seven in the evening, there were only the cab driver and Rivanah in sight around Tiger Point.

It was around 8:30 pm but there was still no sign of the stranger. The silence and emptiness of the place made her heart race. Though Rivanah had dared to come far from the city, standing alone at a

distance from Tiger Point she realized perhaps she shouldn't have. She wanted to call Danny but messaged the stranger instead.

Are you coming? I'm already here.

There was no reply. Fifteen minutes later, she noticed a Xylo take a turn and approach her. Rivanah swallowed a lump as the headlights fell on her eyes, blinding her. She blocked her eyes with her hands. The next instant, the lights went off. She strained her eyes to see who it was but it was pitch black. Slowly, she saw a man walking towards her with a bouquet in his hands and a smile on his face. As he reached closer, she could tell it was a smell she had inhaled before.

'Happy birthday baby,' the man wished.

As his face became clear, an astonished Rivanah blurted 'Danny?'

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‘What?’ Danny said. ‘Don’t tell me you came here without knowing it was me. I wanted to surprise you, but I knew you had understood my prank.’

No, she didn’t know it was him. The message had come from an unknown number like always and there was no way she could guess it was a prank.

‘Now will you take these?’ Danny urged forwarding the bouquet to her. She took it with an expression unlike the one Danny was expecting.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked. Rivanah realized she would have to think of an excuse fast. She

immediately hugged him tightly and whispered in his ear, 'I was feeling scared.'

Danny hugged her back and said, 'I was watching you all along, so there was nothing to worry about.'

'Did you follow me here?'

Danny broke the embrace and gave her a you-caught-me smile. 'How did you guess it was me who messaged you from an unknown number?' he asked.

'Who else could it be?' she quipped and gave him a forced smile.

'Yeah! It was actually Nitya's number. When you lied to me on the phone that you were going to Pune, I knew you were playing smart.' She smelled his deodorant again.

'New deodorant?'

'Yes. "Just Different," by Hugo Boss, he said. 'How is it?'

‘I like it.’ The same deodorant was of course a coincidence, she told herself and said aloud, ‘By the way whose car is that?’ she said eyeing the Xylo.

‘A friend’s.’

‘One second,’ Rivanah went to the cab driver and asked him to leave after paying his dues. She came back to Danny and said, ‘Why Tiger Point?’ Switching on the car’s headlights they leaned on the front of the car, looking at each other.

‘I wanted to be away from everything today except you. I was here a month back for a short film and that’s when I had decided we would celebrate your birthday here in the serenity and silence of the night.’

‘Celebrate?’

Danny gave her an amused smile, went back to open the car’s door, and brought out a cake, two glasses and a bottle of champagne. He placed them on the car’s bonnet. She glanced at the cake, the

champagne, and then at Danny. Why did she subject herself to momentary depression when she had such a caring boyfriend? She could have cried seeing Danny fixing two small candles making up the number 16 on the cake and then light them with a lighter.

'Blow them,' he said.

'Why sixteen?'

'My love for you shall be forever young, that's why.'

Wearing a white round-neck tee and jeans Danny looked his most handsome self in the aura of the candle light. Rivanah came forward, blew the candle, and cut a piece with the plastic knife. She picked up the piece and brought it close to Danny's mouth. He took the piece from her hand and pushed it back in her mouth instead, taking a bite from the other end and licking every bit of it from around her mouth just like she did from around his.

Then they poured some champagne in the glasses and sipped on it sitting in front of the car by the edge of Tiger Point as Danny briefed her about his meeting with a film producer who was willing to give him a chance in a regional film. Rivanah was more relieved than happy to hear it. She had decided that once Danny had signed a film, she would discuss marriage plans with him before telling her parents about it. Her mother did have a point when she said that sometimes one should know the current status of a relationship and the direction towards which it is headed.

'I have had many girlfriends in the past, but they meant nothing to me. You are slowly becoming my everything, Rivanah,' he said after a prolonged silence. They had switched off the car's headlights. Under the soft romantic moonlight, he resembled the Prince she had dreamt about as a kid and believed some day would come and sweep her off her feet. Did she deserve such goodness? The

break up with Ekansh had somehow convinced her nothing good would ever happen to her. Though Danny's presence proved otherwise, she wasn't sure. When you have seen dry days for too long it becomes difficult to believe that rain is awaiting you. And even if you see a rain-laden cloud all you tell yourself is perhaps it is an illusion.

To blur the line between illusion and reality, Rivanah leaned towards him and locked her lips with his. Danny responded by sucking her lips hard. She soon felt his big hands on her breasts over her white shirt. His demeanour told her he wanted control and she willingly gave him that. With his tongue licking the cavity of her mouth and her hands around his neck, Danny picked her up in a flash. The power with which he did so acted as an aphrodisiac for Rivanah.

Once the smooch broke, Danny placed her on the roof of the Xylo and looked arrow straight at her as he doffed his tee, shoes, jeans, and socks. This

was the first time she was seeing him in his briefs. She missed a heartbeat as he climbed up to the car's roof to join her.

The trees and the other surrounding flora started to dance to a mild breeze. Rivanah's mind went numb as he stripped her off her shirt, trousers, undergarments; one at a time. Every touch of his was also stripping the clothes of hurt from her soul. Soon she felt his bare skin rubbing her bare body. As they smooched again her heart gave her a hint in the form of two tear drops that she was finally happy after a long time.

For a moment Danny stopped and glanced at her inquiringly. She nodded bringing herself even closer to him and continuing to kiss him all over his face. In no time, her hand went down and grabbed his hard penis along with his taut balls while he cupped her breasts and caressed her erect nipples with his thumb. The cold car's roof and the warm grab of his hands took her sexual itch to a

certain level which turned her into an immoral beast. Rivanah pushed Danny and made him lie down flat on the car's roof. She carefully put his hands above his head.

'Don't move,' she said and started kissing her way down. Her hair glided over his skin as she moved down, pushing his erection to the maximum. She tugged down his underwear and sucked him for long after which she rode him with her legs on either side of his waist, guiding his hard penis inside her puffy and wet vagina with ease.

Rivanah moaned out as the thick penis entered her tight vaginal walls. As she started subtly bouncing on it, the car made a funny creaking noise feeling their movement. They exchanged a smile as Danny, still inside her, flipped Rivanah to come on top of her.

She felt like she was flying as he looked straight into her eyes while she held on to him tight. Though she was enjoying herself, soon the car's

surface started to hurt her back. Danny understood her dilemma and, once again, changed position. Placing his hand on her butt, he sat up stretching his legs. They both were now sitting up with Rivanah on his lap with her inner thighs wrapping his waist. As she started to ride him, she put her hands around his neck. The position made him hit spots inside her which had never been probed before. And it released unprecedented pleasure. Her breasts rubbed his face every time she went up and down. Danny's above average strength that lasted for more than an hour gave her the first real orgasm of her life. Rivanah moaned out loud in ecstasy, feeling all her muscles curl-in together. During the orgasm, she felt her soul leaving her, traversing the entire cosmos, and then return to her, gravid with everything she ever desired. Danny held her butt and stood up on the car's roof along with her. He then allowed her to keep her feet down and then flipped her without warning. He

placed his hands on her breasts and took her from behind. She actually felt she would die of pleasure and knew well that this pleasure death would be her real birth.

Danny came thrice that night, while Rivanah orgasmed twice. She couldn't believe how exhausted she was once they were eventually done. Lying naked on the car's roof in Danny's strong arms and staring at the star studded night sky, she couldn't believe what had just happened.

'I didn't tell you this but I dreamt of making love to you like this.'

'When did that happen?' Rivanah sounded surprised.

'Obviously I don't remember the exact date, but I guess it was a couple of weeks back. And I thought whenever we'll do it for the first time, we would do it on top of a car,' Danny said.

'On top of a car?' Rivanah giggled.

‘It was a fantasy of mine. Why, don’t you have one?’

‘Umm,’ Rivanah thought and said, ‘Maybe making love blindfolded.’

‘Ahan, we shall do that soon.’ Danny stole a kiss from her forehead.

There was silence. And in that silence their own selves told them a lot about the other.

‘I love you Danny,’ she whispered.

‘I love you too,’ he gasped kissing her cheeks.

‘I never knew I would say these words to someone else as well.’

Danny gave her an inquiring look.

‘I told you about Ekansh. ButI never told you I loved him with all my heart. I never thought I would be in love again.’

There was silence.

‘Do you want to ask me anything?’ she asked.

‘Do you love me Rivanah?’ Danny said turning and taking her face in his hand as if she was an

infant.

'A lot and that's why I'm scared of things going wrong.'

'God forbid if something does go wrong, will you regret this night we had?'

'Never.'

'Nor will I and so we have nothing to be scared of. I know it's difficult to predict the future but what I can promise is I will leave no stone unturned to be by your side.'

'I want to believe you Danny. I really do, but when you lose a person whom you once loved with all your heart and soul to something as cheap as adultery, then an important part of you simply stops believing in love. Everything that comes after heartbreak doesn't seem worth it anymore.' A pause later, she asked looking into his eyes, 'Do you think I'm the most beautiful person you have ever met?'

‘I think you are the only one who makes me believe that everything is beautiful.’

She smiled, proud of her choice this time.

‘What will you say,’ Danny brought his face so close to hers that his lips brushed hers as he talked, ‘If I tell you that no temptation can ever snatch you from me?’

Rivanah touched his face with her fingers and said softly, ‘I’ll believe you but there are so many things we have to fight.’

‘Life itself is a fight. But the point is: are you willing to take it on for us?’

Rivanah nodded and said, ‘I’m willing to otherwise I wouldn’t have been lying here naked in your arms.’

Sleeping in his fragrance she discovered a new hope.

Late into the night, they woke up with a start as they heard their car honking loudly. Danny jumped down naked and found a chewing gum pasted on

the horn. As Rivanah joined him covering her privates with her hands, they took a round of the car to see if everything was okay. She noticed all their clothes had been arranged neatly on the bonnet of the car to form a smiley.

'Must be some jerk,' Danny said.

'Must be.' Rivanah looked around trying to spot the obvious someone who could have followed her to Tiger Point. Danny quickly wore his jeans and was about to go ahead to look when Rivanah stopped him saying, 'Forget it.'

21

'I won't be able to come next Saturday so it'll be a holiday for you all,' Rivanah told the kids in Hindi.

'But when I'm back, I'll take a test. I want you all to write A to Z without looking at the books so prepare well. There will be a special treat in store for those who complete the test successfully. Understood?' There was collective yes from the ten beaming kids.

Rivanah was scheduled to fly to Kolkata the following Friday. On Wednesday morning, she received a phone call from inspector Kamble who told her that she would have to appear in court to

identify the two rapists in front of the judge. She felt relieved to know that her face would be hidden from the rapists and the media as per her request. The next day she did what was asked of her. Since it wasn't a high profile case, there was not much media present anyway. The court was nothing like what she saw in films. Things went smoother and quicker than her expectation. The judge announced the date on which it would relay the final verdict. The date was a month and half away. While returning back to her office in an autorickshaw she realized that the meter in the autorickshaw seemed tampered with. According to the new meter rates of autorickshaws in Mumbai, for every one kilometre 11.33 rupees would be charged after the initial one and a half kilometres for 17 rupees. This had happened many a times before but she had given the extra fare without any qualm. But that day when she was about to get down from the autorickshaw, she noticed the meter showed three

rupees extra. Rivanah immediately barked out at the auto driver. More than the driver, she surprised herself. As her voice ascended, a traffic policeman joined them and asked her to pay three rupees less. Walking into her office, she understood it wasn't about those three rupees but about taking a stand on a matter. Sitting in her cubicle, she drank some water wondering if it was only because of the stranger that she got to know a side of her which was alien to her before. For someone who would pay extra money to avoid any kind of a tussle, she fought for a mere three rupees? For someone whose social conscience was restricted to a Facebook post, she actually stood up so that a girl could get justice? Rivanah was sure even her parents who knew her so well would not believe it. Just like teaching the poor kids made her more compassionate, this minor incident with the auto driver made her realize there's more substance in her than she initially thought.

She typed a message for the stranger:

It's been long. I think we should meet now.

Come back from Kolkata and we'll meet, the stranger replied.

Was there anything in her life the stranger wasn't aware of? The stranger did seem a little scary at times but till now he had been harmless. Maybe because till now she had listened to whatever she was asked to do. This relationship—or whatever it was that she shared with this unknown person—had its own troughs and crests but if someone asked her now, Rivanah would say she was happy the person was there for her. He knew all her weaknesses but like a true friend kept it a secret. At least till now.

The next morning Danny dropped her off at the airport. They hugged for a good two minutes before they waved each other goodbye. It was a matter of one week. She would have cried if it was her first relationship but by now she had prepared

herself for separation. It was important because that was the only immunity she could have for herself against any possible heartache. Attraction depletes itself with indulgence contrary to attachment. What started as an intense physical attraction in the case of Danny had, over time, transformed into an attachment. Danny Abraham was not only her love interest anymore but an emotional cover against the disaster named Ekansh Tripathi that happened to her once upon a time. For the world she had forgotten Ekansh long back, but for her she would always remember him. The good thing was that she was at least out of the denial phase or she thought.

Once in Kolkata, she saw that the arrangement for Mou's marriage, Rivanah's cousin, was going on with aplomb. All the relatives were stationed at her Pishi's place in Behala. There was a tent that had been put up at the terrace where the entire family's breakfast, lunch, and dinner was being

prepared for the past two days before the marriage. Rivanah was happy to meet most of her cousins but talking to them, she realized she couldn't connect to them anymore. They were what she was before she went to Mumbai to work. They had only seen the world that was provided to them by their affluent parents and not the world that was for real. Hence their biased and myopic conclusions about everything under the sun which they were always ready to throw at everyone as the truth irked Rivanah all the more. She somehow tried to mix in and wished time passed soon so that she could go back to Mumbai to work, to teach the kids, to be with Danny, and most importantly to be herself.

One by one, the rituals were conducted—from 'ayiburow bhaat' to 'gaye holud' till the evening arrived when the marriage was supposed to take place. Rivanah had a spat with her mother who wanted her to wear a heavy Banarasi saree and put on proper make-up.

‘I’m not the bride mumma. I don’t need to look good,’ she said.

‘I don’t know what has gone into you ever since you started working. Earlier you used to pester me for all this.’

‘People grow up mumma. We think these superficial things make us happy when in fact they don’t.’

The duel went on for half an hour after which Rivanah was emotionally blackmailed to wear not only the Banarasi saree but also heavy jewellery and make-up. Her mother seemed overjoyed when her father said she was looking even better than her mother in her hay days.

The borjatri came with the groom and were welcomed wholeheartedly by the girl’s side. Rivanah kept her distance from her cousins who were making up silly plans of embarrassing the young men accompanying the groom simply because she found the whole exercise disgustingly

silly. In no time she was feeling completely out of place. It was while sipping Pepsi standing alone by a pillar in the corner that she noticed a particular guy aiming his mobile phone at her. The moment their eyes met, he moved the phone away. She understood he was clicking her or maybe videotaping her without her permission. She didn't know the guy which only meant he had to be from the groom's side. She avoided him and went to be by Mou's side. The same guy was there too aiming his phone at her. She excused herself from Mou and went straight towards the guy.

'Any problem?' she asked.

'That doesn't sound like a Bengali name to me,' the guy said. Rivanah honestly didn't anticipate such a smooth response from a guy who looked studious in a boring way from a distance. Standing a couple of inches taller than her, Rivanah observed, the guy was clean shaved except for a tiny dot of hair under his lower lip. He was

wearing a suit and had very short but spiked hair. He adjusted his rimless specs as he talked and spoke with a slight American accent too. Overall, he looked suave and very corporate.

'Is that how you show your admiration for a girl? Using your phone's camera?' There was a hint of flirtatiousness in her voice that could have aroused any guy instantly.

'The phone is going to be with me all night, not you. So I thought...'

Rivanah blushed slightly at the comment and said, 'But it is indecent to click a girl without her permission.'

The guy took a few seconds, came closer and showing her his phone, deleted the five pictures he had clicked of hers. Rivanah was impressed.

'I'm sorry,' he said with a smile.

'It's okay,' Rivanah said without making anything obvious.

‘Thank you. This guilty guy would appreciate it if the gorgeous girl let’s him know of a proper way of admiring her?’

‘Why is it so necessary to do that?’ she teased maintaining a straight face.

‘The necessity is a guy thing,’ he said maintaining the naughtiness.

‘Does the admirer have a name?’ she asked.

‘Abhiraj Mukherjee,’ he said bringing forward his hand.

‘Rivanah Bannerjee,’ she said shaking his hand.

‘Oh no!’ he quipped looking at his hand; astonished. Rivanah shrugged at him inquiringly.

‘I may melt anytime now,’ he clarified.

‘What?’

‘You are so hot!’

‘Shut up!’

She blushed, he giggled. They walked up to the dining place where a large buffet had been arranged. She took a plate and a spoon for herself.

He was close behind as he noticed her put some salad on her plate.

'Are you single?' he said picking the same salad as her.

'How does it matter?' She turned back for a trice and proceeded to take a scoop of mixed vegetables on her plate.

'It's not that I'm afraid of competition but it will help me to know if I need to prepare for one or not.' He put a little amount of the mixed vegetables on his plate too.

'Your questions are always direct but your answers are always twisted,' she said and skipped the Shahi Paneer, taking the Malai Kofta instead.

'Glad to know you've been noticing me as well,' he said skipping the paneer and choosing the Kofta as well.

Once they were done filling their plates, he repeated himself, 'Are you single?'

‘Maybe,’ she said with such a teasing smile that Abhiraj could feel a tickle in his loins.

Rivanah enjoyed the rest of the marriage ceremony with Abhiraj by her side. He didn’t waste a single moment to blatantly put forward a cheesy line appreciating her beauty. She asked him to stop every time he did so but somewhere inside she was enjoying the appreciation too. Ekansh used to do that in the beginning but with Danny she missed it. The latter was the quiet, caring lover to whom flattery didn’t come naturally. By the end of the night, Abhiraj asked her for her phone number but Rivanah didn’t show any interest in sharing it.

The reception was scheduled two days later in north Kolkata where the groom’s family was based. Right after the ‘*phera jatra’* where the bride was officially taken away by the groom to his place, everyone started dispersing from Mou’s place. Once home, Rivanah finally felt relieved.

But it didn't last long since in the evening her mother asked her to dress up once again.

'What for mumma?' She sounded irked.

'Some guests are coming for dinner. I don't want you to look like a depression patient.'

She had to doll up once again against her wishes. Her parents were happy when they noticed her helping her mother prepare dinner. It was her father who opened the door when the guests arrived. They were made comfortable on the couch while Mr Bannerjee called out to his wife and daughter.

'They have come,' he said.

Mrs Bannerjee welcomed them with folded hands and a warm smile.

She was followed by Rivanah who put up a pretence. Her fake smile suddenly vanished when she saw Abhiraj sitting on the couch with a sly smile.

‘This is Mr and Mrs Mukherjee,’ she heard her father say. ‘And this is Abhiraj; their only child. He worked with Microsoft for three years in the US and has now come back to India. He is a topper from NIT, Ranchi.’

She already knew all this about him since their banter at the marriage hall a night before. But the way her father took pride in relaying someone else’s son’s resume told Rivanah the obvious—Abhiraj was his probable son-in-law.

‘Remember I told you about Shantu uncle?’ Mr Bannerjee asked Rivanah. ‘This is him. It was such a pleasant coincidence to meet his family at Mou’s marriage.’

Now it was all clear: Shantu Mukherjee and her father had studied together in college. A month after her graduation, he had asked for Rivanah’s hand for his son. She had not met them then. And now meeting them at Mou’s marriage, Shantu uncle must have pushed the marriage proposal again. Or

was it her father this time? Rivanah greeted Mr and Mrs Mukherjee and said a soft 'Hi' to Abhiraj. Within minutes her mother started telling everyone how her daughter was doing a great social service back in Mumbai by teaching poor kids along with her job at an MNC.

'Our daughter believes that working in an MNC is not everything. Sometimes one needs to live for others too. She has been a compassionate soul right from the time she was a kid,' her mother said smiling at everyone present there one by one.

'Commendable!' Abhiraj's father said.

'Do you want to study further or...' Abhiraj's mother asked.

'She'll do a BMA,' her mother shot back.

'BMA?' Abhiraj's father frowned.

'She means MBA,' Rivanah said. 'I may pursue an MBA but haven't decided yet.'

To mitigate the awkwardness Rivanah excused herself to the kitchen and brought water for the

guests.

'Come let me show you around our house,' her father said to the guests. The elders stood up and followed him. *It was the grand old Indian plan of leaving the boy and the girl alone to talk,* Rivanah thought with locked jaws. The more she said she wouldn't marry, the more they didn't let go of any opportunity to get her married. She saw Abhiraj beaming from ear to ear as if he had just been declared the winner of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* without going through any questions.

'I can't get married to you,' she said.

'Ouch! Why?'

'I love someone else.'

'But you were single till last night.'

'I said maybe.'

'Maybe means you are single.'

'Maybe means I could be single or committed as well.'

Abhiraj was silent for some time. He looked genuinely hurt. Then suddenly he turned cheerful.

'It doesn't matter really. Even I have a girlfriend.'

'You do?' Rivanah hoped she didn't sound too surprised.

'Yeah, back in the US. We are only sexually compatible but not emotionally.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means she likes me in bed but otherwise she thinks I'm a loser and I think she is a bitch.'

Rivanah made an offensive face and said, 'Anyway, the point is we can't get married. So please tell your parents that. I'll tell mine.'

'Hmm. By the way what's his name?' he said.

'Did I ask your girlfriend's name?'

'Sulagna Mitra.'

Rivanah looked at him intently for a moment and said, 'Danny Abraham.'

Abhiraj broke into a smile.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I’m sure your parents won’t allow it.’

‘Allow what?’

‘For you to become Mrs Abraham. Come on, I know Bong parents. When it comes to emotional blackmail, nobody can beat them. So this Danny Abraham won’t be yours.’

‘You have some audacity.’ Rivanah sounded stern.

‘To state a fact I only need a mouth and not any audacity. That’s the truth and I’m sure you know it.’

Rivanah knew her parents would never allow her to marry Danny. The fact that they had arranged the Mukherjee’s visit was a signal enough what they thought of Danny and her after their Mumbai visit.

‘I’ll make it work,’ she said in an unconvincing manner. Before Abhiraj could respond, their parents joined them laughing aloud on some archaic joke.

The dinner went well with the parents discussing IPL, politics, and the new Rajarhat housing projects. While walking them up to the gate after dinner, Abhiraj asked, 'May I now have your phone number please?'

Rivanah had already denied him that luxury.

'I think I…'

'Don't worry. I'll tell my parents to look for someone else but can we be friends at least?'

Abhiraj seemed to mean what he said. She exchanged phone numbers with him before the Mukherjee family left.

At night, she talked with Danny for a long time since her arrival in Kolkata. She wanted to distract herself from Abhiraj's words: *Danny won't be yours*. It injured her. She sounded happy to Danny on the phone but inside her there was a storm raging. It didn't stop even after talking to Danny. Soon she found herself typing a message to the stranger:

What to do when you are in love with the journey but at the same time scared of the undesirable destination which you know is going to arrive sooner or later?

A response came after half an hour:

If you are really in love, then no destination should scare you.

Rivanah read the line over and over again. Each time, it renewed her confidence in her relationship with Danny. She was happy to have asked for the stranger's advice.

Have you ever been in love? she messaged.

It's impossible to go through life without being in love, the stranger messaged back.

What is love for you? she asked.

Love is when someone else protects you from your own self.

Rivanah couldn't understand what the message exactly meant.

What do you mean?

Each one of us is our own worst enemy. Every moment we harm ourselves; sometimes through the choices we make and at times with the ones we don't. It's a continuous process of emotional and spiritual corruption. And love is when the God in someone heals us from the hurt that the devil in us caused.

The profundity of the statement was now clear to Rivanah. She was lost in thoughts when her phone beeped again.

I too have a question for you: when was the last time you made a mistake, Mini? A terrible, terrible mistake.

Rivanah thought hard for some time and typed:

Trusting Ekansh was a mistake.

A minute later, the reply came:

LOL.

22

The next day Rivanah went to City Centre Mall with her mother who made her buy an expensive lehenga-choli for Mou's reception because Abhiraj's other relatives would be present there.

After the Mukherjee family left the other night, Rivanah decided not to talk to her parents about the matter. Nothing was said to her directly so why should she confront them about it either? If Abhiraj was to be believed, then he would anyway tell his parents that he won't marry her and if he doesn't, then she would talk to her parents about it.

'Didn't you talk to baba about Danny?' she asked her mother while having ice cream by the

Gelato counter.

'I did,' her mother said sounding a little grim.

'What did he say?' Rivanah knew what her father's response would have been but still she was keeping her hopes up.

'It's impossible.'

'Why mumma? Just because he is not a Hindu? Just because he is a struggling actor?'

'This "just because" is not as insignificant a thing as you are making it out to be. Nobody from our family would support you or us. Don't you know what happened with your Meghna di? Her parents still haven't recovered from it. Your pishi didn't even invite them for Mou's wedding.'

The mention of Meghna brought back the images of her verbal spats with Aadil. Rivanah immediately convinced herself even if Danny and she got married, they would never tire of love. And then her innermost insecurity told her: you thought the same about Ekansh too, remember?

‘I would suggest you forget Danny,’ Mrs Bannerjee said wiping off the ice cream from the sides of her mouth with a napkin.

‘Tell me mumma, what’s the most important thing in a marriage now that you have been married to baba for close to twenty seven years? Isn’t it love?’

Her mother seemed lost in her thoughts for some time before she said, ‘Not love. I would say ignorance. A successful marriage depends on ignorance.’

Rivanah shot her an incredulous look.

‘If it was love, your baba would have respected my decision of being a working woman. I chose to ignore my own desires otherwise it would have been difficult to stay with him and raise you. And I’m sure he must have also ignored a lot of my things.’

‘I disagree with you mumma. You two couldn’t have possibly been in love because you married a

total stranger. I love Danny because I have been with him for some months now and will be till we get married.'

'You were with Ekansh too. Did you know him well? Mini, you have to understand this dear that we can only know a person from what he is and not from what he can be. He can be a lot many things besides the thing that we see, the thing that we are in love with.'

Rivanahk new it was futile explaining anything to her parents because they would never understand where she was coming from. They were from a different generation. They grew up in a different world and thus had a different perspective toward life. The best would be to fly off to Mumbai right after the reception. As they say out of sight, out of mind.

The next evening, the entire Bannerjee family went to Mou's reception. The way her parents introduced her to every member of Abhiraj's

family made her feel embarrassingly conscious all through the evening. It was as if a pair of eyes was always on her, ready to judge every move of hers.

'Did you tell your parents that you are not interested in the marriage?' Rivanah asked Abhiraj when she met him alone by the Fuchka stall.

'I haven't yet,' he told her.

'You know…' she started only to be cut short by him.

'I really want to marry you Rivanah and I can't lie to my parents about it,' he said in one breath.

'Do you want to marry someone who loves another guy?'

'Give me a chance,' he said with pride.

'What makes you think you deserve one?'

'I love you, that's why.'

'You love me? Because we talked for some time last evening and an evening prior to that? I thought you were smarter than that.'

Abhiraj was quiet.

‘You don’t have to lie to your parents. I’ll do the needful.’

Rivanah was done with her Fuchka. She simply walked to her mother and complained that her head was aching and that she wanted to go home and rest. She took the car’s keys from her father, asked him to take a cab while returning, and drove herself home.

The first thing she did was prepone her previous flight ticket to Mumbai for the next morning. When her parents came back home later that night, she told them that her team lead had called and asked her to report to office the next day because an important client was visiting them. Though her parents understood their daughter was miffed with them, they couldn’t talk about it because she too didn’t bring up the subject. Rivanah was tired of explaining the same thing to them over and over again. She loved Danny; her parents had to accept it. There was no other option she was giving them.

Whether they wanted to do so wholeheartedly or not was their call.

The next day she decided to go straight to Danny's flat first from the airport. When he called up, she lied to him saying she was still in Kolkata. She wanted to give him a sexy surprise. Danny was supposed to come to his flat in the evening. She cleaned his flat, cooked for him, and was waiting with bated breath for the love of her life to return. It was while waiting for him that there was a sudden power cut. She was about to call him back when she heard someone unlock the door. Rivanah presumed it was Danny and stealthily walked to the drawing room. Holding her breath, she was waiting to jump on him when someone put a ribbon around her eyes and blindfolded her. She could smell the deodorant that Danny wore all the time: 'Just Different' by Hugo Boss. Before she could talk, her hands were handcuffed as well.

23

Danny kept calling Rivanah's phone for an hour but nobody answered. Arriving at their apartment, he found her flat was locked. A nervous Danny eventually relaxed when he saw her in the drawing room of his flat lying on the mattress with a blindfold. Though her pose was a casual one, the fact that she wasn't responding to him told him something otherwise. He removed the blindfold, shook her up, and sprinkled some water on her eyes after which Rivanah started moving her limbs slightly. She looked at Danny in an unfamiliar way. Seconds later, she hugged him tight.

‘What happened? Don’t tell me you were asleep?’ Danny held her in his strong arms, stroking her hair.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. What she meant was she didn’t know what happened after someone made her sniff something on a piece of cloth after which she was tied and stripped naked. She quickly checked the clothes she was wearing: it was a white tank top with black pyjamas, not the clothes she had been wearing before she lost her senses. And she could feel fresh inners too. Rivanah clearly remembered the one she was wearing before had been cut by...it had to be the stranger. Did he fuck her as well?

‘What do you mean you don’t know? What happened here? Why were you wearing a blindfold and sleeping?’ Danny questioned, holding her strongly by her shoulders.

‘I was attacked,’ she blurted out holding the blindfold without wishing to share the incident

with Danny.

'Just calm down and tell me what really happened?'

'Please give me some water.' Danny left her and sprang toward the kitchen. Should she tell him about the stranger? What happened a few hours back in the darkness of the power cut was not something that a well-wisher would do to you.

'Here,' Danny said extending the glass of water towards her. She gulped half the water in the glass at one go and said, 'There was a power cut. I heard the door unlock and when I came to this room I was blindfolded and attacked.'

Danny looked around.

'But everything looks in place. Why would someone attack you and then leave without touching anything. In fact, even you don't look hurt. Are you?'

Rivanah nodded quietly. She was still not willing to tell Danny what really happened.

They had a silent dinner after which they slept together. Though Danny had to meet Nitya in the morning, Rivanah didn't let him go till she was ready for office herself. She would have messaged the stranger about the incident but couldn't because neither Danny nor she could sleep all night.

Once in office, she sat down by the cubicle and had just opened her phone's inbox to type a message when a security guard came to her.

'You have a parcel,' he said and kept a big brown envelope on her table along with a box covered in brown paper. He gave her a piece of paper where she signed next to her name. The guard went away. She kept her phone on the desk and took the envelope in her hand. She tried to feel it. Something soft; she thought. There was no return address written on it. A curious Rivanah cut open the parcel.

I'm sorry, the paper note said.

Inside the box was a lavender coloured lace negligee. Rivanah frowned. Is it from the stranger? For the first time he had given her a gift. She wasn't surprised he knew her favourite colour. Rivanah kept the negligee inside lest someone saw it and picked up her phone to type a message to the stranger:

Why did you do what you did last night? Is that all that you wanted: to tie and fuck me?

It was during her lunch that the stranger replied:

I told you we shall meet once you are back from Kolkata. BTW, I didn't fuck you.

Then why did you blindfold me, tie me up, strip me naked, and rub my make up off?

I wanted to see how you really look like without any kind of a mask.

Mask? What are you talking about?

When was the last time you made a mistake Mini? A terrible, terrible mistake?

I have answered that already. Ekansh was a mistake.

Think hard and be honest.

I'm being honest.

Sometimes we lie not to cover the truth but to cover that side of us which the truth may strip to bareness.

I don't understand.

You better do else I'll have to make you understand.

Why is he suddenly sounding threatening? Rivanah thought. *What does he want from me? Why is he asking the same question again and again when I have answered him honestly?*

Rivanah didn't message back nor did she receive any message till evening when she was buying milk from a shop right opposite to her place.

I hope you liked the dress.

That's my favourite colour, she responded.

I'm sure when you will wear it, you shall be my favourite.

A smile touched her face as she took the milk pouches and crossed the lane to reach her building. The stranger sure knew how to flatter and impress a girl after being rude to her. Or was it some sort of a mind-game he was playing with her?

Rivanah showed the negligee to Ishita that night.

'Wow! So the stranger is finally starting to dote on you, huh?'

'Well, I don't know,' Rivanah said. She thought Ishita wouldn't have said all this had she known how threatening the stranger sounded during the day. Was he a schizophrenic?

'What if he proposes to you next? Whom will you choose—Danny or the stranger?'

'Come on, I love Danny!'

Ishita gave her a mean look and said, 'That's the problem with you moralistic girls. You don't know how to enjoy.'

‘What would you have chosen?’

‘Me?’ Ishita said with pride, ‘I would have dated the stranger.’

‘And Danny.’

‘Please don’t mind girl, but I don’t think Danny is the marrying kinds yet.’

Rivanah knew Ishita was being honest at the cost of sounding rude. Danny was still a struggling actor and model. But would she date the stranger in spite of being in love with Danny? Then a thought occurred to her: Why the hell was she even considering it when she knew well the stranger never did what she expected of him?

24

Rivanah didn't know who she was more proud of —herself or the kids when all ten of them passed their test of writing the alphabets from A to Z without looking at their textbooks. A couple of them even wrote basic but correct sentences with the simple English words given to them. She clicked pictures of all their papers with her phone and sent them to Danny. She also uploaded a few on Facebook with a status update: *Happiness is when your students score full and you score high.*

As a treat she arranged for the ten kids to have a sumptuous dinner at KFC in Infinity Mall in Malad west. While she was wiping her fingers with the

napkin one of the kids asked, 'Tai, when is our next test?'

Everyone laughed out aloud. Rivanah knew how much this one dinner meant to them. The bill of that one meal amounted to eleven hundred and fifty rupees: an amount with which she would have purchased a single dress before. The irony of it weighed on her. She smiled at the kid who had by now pushed the burger down his throat.

'Very soon. Now nobody leaves the table till I'm back, alright?' Rivanah said and went to the washroom. She came back to notice the kids were crowding around something kept at the centre of the table. She soon noticed there was a small box inside from which shone two diamond studs. Rivanah was more than surprised.

'Who kept these here?' she asked the kids staring at the diamond studs.

One of the kids looked around and gestured at a woman. Her uniform told her she was one of the

cleaning ladies. Rivanah picked up the box and scampered to the cleaning staff.

'Did you keep this on that table?' Rivanah asked holding the stud box.

The woman nodded.

'Who gave you this?' Rivanah said.

The cleaning lady looked around for a moment and pointed toward a middle-aged man who was busy buying Dosa from a South Indian eatery. She went to him.

'Excuse me, did you give this box to that woman there?'

The middle-aged man checked out Rivanah once in an annoying manner and nodded.

'Why did you give it to her?'

'I was asked to pass it on, so I simply did.'

'Who asked you to pass it on?'

The man pointed out toward a teenager who was busy having ice cream with another girl in the food court. Rivanah rushed to the boy and asked him the

same question: who gave you the box? The boy looked around like the others and aimed at a woman who was sitting with her kid at another corner. Rivanah rushed to the woman. When she inquired about the box, the woman told her an old woman had given it to her and asked her to pass it to the young boy. Rivanah looked around but there wasn't any old woman in sight anymore. The ten kids had joined her by then.

'What happened tai?' asked one of them.

Rivanah said, 'Nothing'. She understood it was useless to spot the stranger. He had used a chain of people to reach her. And some of them must have left the food court by then. As her breath came back to normal, she looked at the studs. They were gorgeous. Was Ishita right about the stranger developing a soft corner for her?

'What's that tai?' a girl in the group asked her pointing toward the roller coaster on which people were screaming their lungs out.

‘Do you guys want to check it out?’ she asked the group lovingly.

There was a collective nod. Rivanah arranged for the kids to experience the roller coaster ride while she stood near its gate waving happily at them and making a video recording of it. She stopped in-between when she received a message from an unknown number.

Hope you liked the studs.

Why are you doing this?

What do you think?

Answer me straight.

When does a guy gift a girl a pair of studs?

You know that I’m committed, right? she messaged.

That makes you all the more tempting.

Rivanah couldn’t help but smile at the message. It momentarily made her feel good about her otherwise confused self. It wasn’t that the stranger wanted to have a physical relationship with her.

That she was confident about, otherwise he would not have spared her the night he tied and stripped her. Does it mean that he intends to be more serious with her? And in the past whenever he was helpful to her, was it because he wanted to make her feel emotionally accountable towards him? Was this all his grand plan to make her fall for him? Rivanah's thoughts were interrupted when she heard the kids scream out with joy as the roller coaster turned upside down. She forced a smile and thought she would tell him straightaway she wasn't in any mood to cheat on Danny. She was about to type a message when another came in:

Forget Danny.

Rivanah didn't like the tone of the message. She didn't reply but once she came home after dropping the kids at their place, she showed the message to Ishita. The latter gave her phone back after reading the message and turned quiet. Rivanah had intentionally brought her up to their

building's terrace lest the stranger heard them talking. It was humid outside and from time to time, she could see Ishita wiping the sweat off her forehead while Rivanah allowed her perspiration to soak her.

'Are you going to say something or not?' Rivanah said feeling impatient.

'I think you ought to stop it,' Ishita finally said.

'Stop what? I never started anything,' Rivanah argued.

'Why did you have to respond to the stranger in the first place?'

'I thought he was harmless. And he proved to be harmless and quite helpful. You know that! In fact he did some beautiful things to me which I wouldn't have done myself and which I shall never forget,' Rivanah said. There was no denying the fact that there had been a remarkable change in her since the time she first came to Mumbai and the reason for that difference was the stranger.

Ishita knew about the kids Rivanah used to teach every Saturday. Rivanah also told her about Ratna and how it made her believe that the stranger was a good human being.

'Tell me, what happens if you don't respond to him from now on? Can he harm you in any way?' Ishita asked.

Rivanah thought about her clip that showed her recording Prateek in a compromising position. Ishita read her mind.

'The clip right? Even if we suppose he hasn't deleted it, how does it matter? You are not naked in it. If it comes out, you can always say Prateek was blackmailing you. And where is Prateek anyway?'

'He left the company a few months back.'

'So? That's even better,' Ishita wiped her sweat again and said, 'For God's sake we could have had this conversation in our air conditioned room as well. Asha is also not there.'

Rivanah swallowed a lump.

'The stranger can hear us talking.'

Ishita was quiet for a moment trying to understand what Rivanah meant and then she dashed out of the terrace. Rivanah joined her soon as they took the stairs to reach their flat. Ishita started searching for possible mikes in the flat while Rivanah closed the main door and stood beside it watching her roomie go berserk. Ishita was doing what she had done the first time she learnt the stranger could hear her. But all in vain. Twenty minutes later, Ishita had still not found anything that looked minutely suspicious.

'How can he hear you?' Ishita said exasperated.

Rivanah immediately put a finger on her lips urging her to be quiet. Ishita realized her mistake. She typed in her phone and showed it to Rivanah: *How?* Rivanah whispered in her ears, 'No idea.'

Ishita whispered back, 'This guy is dangerous.'

The doorbell rang. The two girls exchanged a nervous glance. Ishita quickly went to her room and returned with a bottle of pepper spray

'Open the door,' she said mentally preparing herself for a surprise attack if need be. Rivanah unlocked the door and peeped to see who it was. Ishita's grip on the pepper spray tightened. When the door full opened, both girls relaxed. It was Asha.

'Close the door,' Ishita said. Rivanah complied. Asha gave both the girls a skeptic look.

'Our flat is bugged,' Ishita gasped.

'How do you know?' Asha asked looking at both of them with a confused expression on her face.

'We just know,' Ishita said.

'Did you guys check?'

'We did but found nothing,' Rivanah said. This was the maximum Asha had talked to them in the last ten months.

‘Where all have you not looked?’ Asha asked in a whisper.

Ishita looked at Rivanah and after a thoughtful pause said softly, ‘I didn’t check the bathroom, the toilet, the attic above, and behind that wardrobe. There are a lot of cobwebs and cockroaches behind it.’

Asha started with the toilet then the bathroom. She brought a stool and stood on it to have a look at the attic above the bathroom. It was dark and covered with dust, dirt, and cobwebs.

‘Give me a torch,’ she said. Rivanah switched on the flashlight in her phone and handed it over to her. Asha flashed the light into the attic but could see nothing suspicious. She stepped down and went to the kitchen. The same result. The last place that remained was the tiny space behind the wardrobe. With the help of the others, Asha was able to move the heavy teakwood wardrobe. They could see a thick layer of dust on the base of the

floor, clearly telling them that the wardrobe had not been shifted since a long time. Asha peeped back and saw a network of cobwebs. Give me a duster. Ishita soon handed over a piece of cloth that they used to dust the flat with. Once Asha dusted off some of the cobwebs, she saw a cockroach. Behind the cockroach were a couple more like him.

'Be careful,' Ishita remarked.

Asha tried to scare off the cockroaches but none of them moved. They were deadstill in fact. She found the whole thing weird. She stretched her hand and reached for one of the cockroaches. There was still no movement. The next instant she held it by its antenna and brought it out. Both Ishita and Rivanah shrieked out.

'What are you doing?' Ishita cried out looking at Asha who was dangling the cockroach in her hand. Then suddenly she threw one of them at the girls. Both scampered inside the other room screaming.

The next minute they peeped out and saw Asha had a whole lot of cockroaches by her feet. She squashed one of them. The girls couldn't believe their eyes. As they came forward nervously, they saw there were other squashed ones too and each of the cockroaches, which were clearly made of plastic, had a tiny mike hidden in its belly.

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Danny had ordered pizza for the girls on his way to their flat. By the time the delivery came, he too had arrived and had gone to his flat to freshen up.

Once the girls smashed all the plastic cockroaches and ripped out the mikes from them, Rivanah made them promise they would keep the discovery to themselves.

'But why?' Ishita was confused. Someone tried to compromise her private space and yet Rivanah was not ready to do anything about it. By then Asha had retired to her room.

'I agree he shouldn't have bugged our flat but he hasn't harmed me yet. Have you forgotten how he

helped me get the clip from Prateek?'

'I remember all of it but…'

'Then I think we should give him one chance,' Rivanah pleaded.

'Are you sure you aren't suffering from some kind of Stockholm syndrome?' Ishita asked. Rivanah gave her a clueless look.

'It's a syndrome where the victim falls in love with her captor,' Ishita clarified.

Rivanah remained quiet. Ishita was about to say more when the doorbell rang. It was the pizza delivery boy. And behind him stood Danny.

'Girls, it's a pizza treat from my side. I'll join you in two minutes,' he said exhibiting his typical charming smile. Ishita took the pizza while Rivanah closed the door and said, 'Ishu, please try to understand.'

'It's okay. I won't tell Danny anything about it unless you want me to.'

'Thank you.'

‘But between the two of us; if you don’t do anything soon, you will be in a situation which you will be unable to handle. If you know what I mean,’ said Ishita and kept the pizza on a table.

‘I do. And don’t worry, nobody can take me away from Danny. I love him.’

‘I hope that’s enough.’

‘It is.’

The pizza dinner went well. The girls gave no hint to Danny about the discovery. Once done, Danny went to his flat while the girls took to their respective beds.

Rivanah didn’t know what time it was when she woke up hearing the doorbell ringing continuously. She called out to Ishita and Asha but neither came out from their room. She soon realized the peculiar thing about the doorbell. It was gaining decibel each time it rang. How could that be possible? Rivanah climbed out of her bed and went to open the main door. She was dumbfounded. It was her

own self by the door who was pressing the doorbell with a noose around her neck. As the two Rivanah's eyes met, the one with the noose gave the other a diabolical smile. Rivanah opened her eyes wide, feeling herself soaking wet with perspiration. It had been some time since she had last seen the nightmare. But this time she felt the chill of it the most. Before her mind could calm her down, her phone's alarm started ringing. *But why at midnight?* she wondered and checked her phone. The alarm screen showed her the note she had once put but forgotten to delete it.

My shona's birthday, the alarm note said.

It was Ekansh's birthday. She wouldn't have remembered it had the alarm not buzzed. But the alarm did what she had once wanted it to. She held her head down knowing well that now the memories of last year would stalk her, torture her, bleed her, and won't leave till they had emotionally raped her. She tried sleeping but

couldn't. Ekansh's smiling face was in front of her. In the end, she thought of giving in to her urge of checking out Ekansh's profile on Facebook. That was her only link to him. She logged in to her Facebook profile, unblocked Ekansh, and went to his profile. The last time he had a photograph of him with a girl as his profile picture. It was the same girl Rivanah had caught him with. This time he had a single picture. She clicked on it but it didn't open. She clicked on the message option and as it opened she could well see her last message to him which was thirteen months back. It read: *Not able to call you. Missing you. Call me back asap.* He had indeed called her within minutes of that message. Her fingers, quite involuntarily, started scrolling down the inbox and she spent the next two hours reading all the twelve thousand, seven hundred, and eighty eight messages they had exchanged in the last four years of their relationship. Her fingers didn't come off the

laptop's mouse scroller till she reached the first message which was from Ekansh: *Thanks for accepting my friend request. How are you?*

Those all-day-long messaging, late night phone calls, bunking classes to meet up, going for secret dates, the naughty acts in movie theatres, convincing the parents about fake college trips and what not. They meant nothing now. In one of the messages she had written: *I won't ever be able to live without you.* And he had responded with: *Me too.* Rivanah laughed out amidst tears in her eyes. The break-up had happened and she was indeed living. And so was he. On an impulse she wrote: 'Happy Birthday asshole. You are such a pain in the ass.' Immediately after sending it to Ekansh, she realized she shouldn't have done it. It would only tell him that he still mattered to her. She was about to close her Facebook message inbox when her eyes noticed the 'other' section where sixty five unread messages were present. She clicked open

the section and went through some of them which were from boys who wanted to be her friend on Facebook. The messages were written in terrible English and projected equally funny thoughts. Some of them had even attached their Kundali for marriage while some had written poems in praise of her photoshopped profile and cover pictures. Rivanah had a constant smile as she read the messages one by one. The smile totally dried up when she reached the forty seventh message. It read:

Hi Rivanah, I made this new id of mine because you have blocked my other id. Happy birthday. I hope you are doing fine. Take Care. Ekansh.

He did remember her birthday earlier in the year. Did it mean he missed her too? Did his message mean she still mattered to him? Did it mean he was willing to stage a comeback given a chance? Or did it mean he only wanted to make her

life miserable by sticking on to her like a predator? Rivanah cursed herself for having opened the other section. The message doesn't mean anything just like she didn't mean anything to him, she told herself. The past can be a part of us but not the whole of us, she reminded herself. After refreshing the page, she noticed that he had changed his profile picture a minute back. It meant he was online at the same time as her. She could connect to him with one click of her mouse but she held back. Rivanah didn't know if he had seen her message or not but she did look at the new profile picture of his: a selfie with a girl she didn't know. They were beaming. She realized the picture was not locked and thus she quickly dragged-dropped it on her desktop, opened the paintbrush application and blackened all their teeth. She blocked Ekansh next, logged out of Facebook, and messaged Danny on Whatsapp. There wasn't any reply. She checked the time: 2:30 am.

Rivanah stood up, took out Danny's duplicate keys from her bag in the wardrobe, and went to his flat. In the darkness, she could see Danny lying on the mattress in the room on his back wearing only a pair of Jockey knickers. She went to him and gently lay down on his back holding him tightly. The touch of his skin relaxed her. Danny woke up but didn't budge.

'Is it a dream or a reality?' he asked with a sleep-heavy voice.

Rivanah kissed his ears softly.

'A dream,' he quipped.

She bit his ears.

'Reality!' he shrieked out.

Still lying on his back she said, 'Do you miss your ex Danny?'

'Which one?'

She bit his shoulder.

'Ouch. Okay, I don't.'

'Why? Have you forgotten them?'

‘Can anyone forget a person with whom you once had a serious relationship?’ he said opening his eyes and looking at nothing in particular.

‘Then?’

‘Then what?’

‘Then how come you don’t miss them?’

‘Maybe because I’m at peace with whatever happened between my exes and me. Maybe because I know for a fact that nothing else could have happened.’

‘Hmm.’

Perhaps he was right, Rivanah thought. She was yet to be at peace with what Ekansh had done with her. But the question was: will she ever be at peace with it?

Danny’s phone vibrated.

‘Who is messaging you so late?’ Rivanah said and picked up his phone.

‘1218,’ he said aloud the password. It was his and her birth dates together. With a smile, she

unlocked the phone. There was an MMS link. She downloaded it. Her blood froze the moment it started playing. It was from the night when she was attacked by the stranger. It showed her all tied up, stark naked, with a piece of cloth in her mouth.

'Who is it?' Danny said groggily.

Rivanah couldn't speak. The message was clear. If the clip can go to Danny's phone, then it can go to anybody's phone.

'Danny...' she said. The fragility in her voice made him sit up.

'I need to tell you something.'

This time it was her phone that beeped with a message from an unknown number.

Forget Danny. I love you more.

26

Neither Danny nor Rivanah slept that night. After she told him everything that had been happening with her since her shift to Mumbai, Danny couldn't help but rebuke her for the first time since their relationship.

'What were you waiting for?' Danny said after giving her a patient hearing.

'Does it also mean that you went to Tiger Point on your birthday not because you guessed it was me but because you thought this psycho called you there? You went just like that? Or did you guys have a real date and I spoilt it for you?'

‘It’s nothing like that Danny. You know I love you and won’t do anything to compromise it. I haven’t met him. I don’t even know what he looks like.’

‘And still you hid him from me Rivanah. And all I know is this isn’t how a healthy relationship progresses. How could you not tell me? This guy attacked you inside my flat and you still did not tell me about it? Don’t you trust me or what?’

I did not want to disturb the equilibrium I have developed with the stranger, Rivanah thought, but didn’t say so lest Danny concluded she was mad.

‘I fought for you with my parents,’ she said instead. ‘So please don’t say I don’t trust you. I know I shouldn’t have hidden it from you and I’m sorry about it. Now can you please tell me what I should do?’

They both waited quietly for the morning to arrive. And by then they had decided: they would go to the police.

Rivanah called inspector Mohan Kamble around nine in the morning.

'Yes Miss Bannerjee, what can I do for you?'

'I need to meet you, sir.'

'Regarding?'

Rivanah glanced at Danny once and then spoke on the phone again, 'There's someone who is harassing me.'

'Come to the police station anytime. I will…'

'Can we please meet elsewhere, Kamble sir? The person I'm talking about follows my every move.'

'You mean a stalker?'

'Yes, you can say so. I don't want to give him an inkling that I'm going to the police.'

'Hmm,' Kamble seemed to think for some time and then said, 'Let's meet at your office then. I'll come in plain clothes. Fine?'

'That will be great sir. At what time?'

Kamble met Rivanah at the smoking zone of her office around one in the afternoon the same day. She couldn't show him the video that was sent to Danny's phone, not only because of the obvious reason, but also because she had deleted the video immediately on a whim. She didn't even remember the phone number through which it was sent. After she briefed Kamble about what the stranger had been doing, she showed him the messages she had saved on the phone and also gave him all the unknown numbers that she had received messages from in the last eleven months or so. Kamble tried calling on a few of the phone numbers but each one of them was switched off.

'Look, Miss Bannerjee, it's quite clear from the messages that he is in love with you. In fact, he himself has confirmed it in one of the last messages he sent.'

'I know.'

‘In these cases it isn’t that difficult to trap the stalker. All you need to do is smooth talk him into revealing himself to you and that’s when we nab him.’ Kamble sounded quite confident.

‘I have asked him to meet me several times but he doesn’t.’

‘Hmm. The only thing that is confusing me is that if he only wanted to be in a relationship with you, why would he make you teach the kids or encourage you to be the witness in the gangrape case? These aren’t things for which we can charge him but still...’

‘Maybe he is a psycho?’ Rivanah suggested.

‘Even psychos have a pattern. If he loved you, he would have at least kissed you once the night he attacked you.’

‘Maybe he did.’

‘But not when you were conscious.’

‘No.’

‘Hmm,’ Kamble scratched his chin thinking hard. ‘Guess he will answer all our questions only when we nab him,’ she said.

Another silent pause followed.

‘Should I text him now and ask him to meet up?’

‘Do it,’ Kamble said instantly.

Rivanah immediately typed a message: *I want to meet you.* She sent it to the number from which the last message had come. There was an awkward silence as the two waited for a reply. In between Kamble excused himself to answer some calls on his phone. When Kamble was advancing back toward her, Rivanah’s phone buzzed with a message.

What’s the hurry?

She showed the message to him. He frowned reading the message and then said, ‘You keep trying to get him to meet you while I try and get the location details of these phone numbers. Let me know without delay if he agrees to meet you.’

‘Okay.’

‘I will send couple of plain clothes constables at the place you are staying to get information about the residents there. You told me about the mike inside the cockroaches. Chances are he is living somewhere close by. Maybe in the same building.’

‘What?’ Rivanah swallowed a lump.

‘I said maybe. I will be going now but don’t be afraid. He won’t harm you. I’ll also need all the white pieces of cloth with the messages on them that you have been getting. Keep them ready with you. Remember this: if he contacts you, just involve him in some talk and don’t enrage him. And most importantly, call me,’ Kamble said.

‘Yes, sure sir.’

Kamble took a start but suddenly stopped and turned to her.

‘By the way, is there any opening in this company?’

For a moment, Rivanah thought Kamble wanted to work in Tech Sky Technologies. Then the obvious occurred to her.

'Please ask your daughter to mail me her resume. I'll pass it on to my HR team for sure.'

'Thanks,' Kamble was gone after noting her email id.

In the evening Rivanah received a message from Danny forsaking if she was free to come to the McDonald's outlet near the Kora Kendra bus stop in Borivali after his audition around nine where he would be waiting. They would have dinner there and then go home together. Rivanah messaged back in the affirmative. She came to her flat, freshened up, and then went out in. On her way out, she did notice two men talking to the guard of her building. Were they the constables? *Could be*, she thought

and took an autorickshaw to reach the Kora Kendra McDonald's.

Rivanah reached before time and bought a Coke and some French Fries for herself to kill time. She opened her Whatsapp chat window. Pooja had surprised her by sending her a picture of her wedding card in the morning. Rivanah checked the card again and sighed. Some people had all the luck. Everything in their life happened at the right time and for the right reason. Rivanah was happy that Pooja was settling down with a guy she had been dating since college. Such life wasn't for her because the universe had reserved all the life's lessons exclusively for her. Pooja's marriage was scheduled for the next month in Kolkata. Though she had promised her she would be there without fail, Rivanah had already decided she wouldn't be going. In fact she would stay away from home till her parents accepted her relationship with Danny.

Rivanah put her hand in the paper box and realized the French fries were finished. She tried to sip the coke but nothing came up the straw. She checked the phone clock: 9:15. There was no sign of Danny. She went to the last dial section of her phone and tapped on the dial button. The next moment she took out her ear piece with a frown. She could hear Danny's phone's ringtone from somewhere behind her. She turned in a flash but couldn't see anything. And precisely then there was a power failure. Rivanah immediately heard one of the McDonald's staff shout out to people to remain where they were and that the power would be back shortly. But Rivanah had a feeling this was no coincidence.

As Danny's phone stopped ringing, she could smell the 'Just Different' deodorant close to her. Every muscle in her body stiffened. The outside chaos suddenly muted and all she could hear was her own breathing and heartbeat. Soon the

fragrance kept getting further away from her. Rivanah slowly relaxed as the power came on. She turned back and found Danny's mobile phone on the empty table. She looked around. Nobody seemed interested in her. Was Danny playing a prank on her? Suddenly her own phone rang. An unknown number flashed on the screen. Was the stranger calling her finally? As she moved her hand to answer the call, she felt the presence of something. Rivanah shrieked and stood up simultaneously, pushing her chair back. There was silence in McDonald's. Everyone was looking at her. Around Rivanah's forearm there was a rope smeared with something red. And the rope was in the form of a noose. The kind she had been having bad dreams about where she saw herself hanging. The buzz returned as one of the staff attended her.

'Any problem madam?'

'No,' she said and noticed her phone was again ringing with the unknown number. She picked it up.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hey baby,’ Danny said. ‘I somehow lost my phone this evening. And…’

‘I have your phone,’ Rivanah cut him short.

‘What?’ Danny was stunned.

‘Come down to McDonald’s, Kora Kendra. I’m waiting,’ She said.

Danny reached a little after ten. The staff there had tried to calm Rivanah down, offering her some water. They wanted to throw the noose away but she didn’t let them. It was a tangible proof. She kept it at a distance from her and kept staring at it, wondering what could be its implication.

In Danny’s presence Rivanah called Kamble. This time he arrived at McDonald’s in a uniform with couple of constables who confiscated the noose.

‘Most of the phone numbers that were used to message you don’t exist anymore and hence it will take more time to spot the last tower they picked

for use,' Kamble said after Rivanah told him what had happened in the last one hour. 'Except for the last two or three numbers. The SIM was last used from Andheri west area.'

'Andheri west?' Rivanah mumbled under her breath.

'Do you know anybody living there?' Kamble asked.

Rivanah nodded. Prateek used to live there. But how could he be the stranger? He wouldn't let her record his own compromised self like that. Or would he to shift her suspicion from him? Another person who went to that area often was Danny. Was that a coincidence as well just like the deodorant Danny and the stranger wore was the same? Rivanah was perplexed.

'This is going a bit too far sir,' Danny said. 'I hope you catch this guy soon.'

Rivanah looked at him. He looked genuinely concerned.

‘Did he message you or tried to get in touch in any way after I left from your office?’ Kamble said.

‘No. Except the one I got from Danny’s number.’

‘Hmm. Anything you can make out of the noose?’

‘Nothing.’ Rivanah kept her dream a secret.

Kamble scratched his chin for some time.

‘Tomorrow is Sunday,’ he said looking at Rivanah. ‘Update your Facebook status saying you will be in Infinity Mall, Andheri with your boyfriend. Make it public.’

‘What for?’ Danny said.

‘If this guy is a genuine stalker, he would be present there for sure.’

‘But we don’t know who he is,’ Rivanah chipped in.

‘We will. But before you reach the mall tomorrow, Danny needs to be present there with another girl. Ask one of your friends. You go there

Rivanah and catch Danny with a girl. An ugly verbal fight ensues, at the end of which you break up with him. Make sure it all seems real. I'm hoping it will be the stalker's bait for making himself visible.'

Rivanah understood Kamble's point. She was anyway experienced about catching a guy with a girl.

'And then?' Danny said.

'I'll tell you that later, but first enact this scene properly. My constables will be present in the mall in plain clothes but they will intervene only if need be.'

'I'll ask Nitya,' Danny said. Rivanah nodded.

'Now you come with me Danny,' Kamble said. 'You will have to file a report with us against the stalker. My constables will drop Rivanah home.'

'May I bring my roomie with me tomorrow?' Rivanah asked.

'If it helps you in any way,' Kamble said.

‘Thank you so much sir.’

◆

The moment she reached home Rivanah did two things: One, she relayed everything to Ishita and two, she updated her Facebook status.

Yippe! Can’t wait to watch the first show of my favourite actor’s movie tomorrow @ Infinity, Andheri!

She checked her Facebook friend list once. There was no suspicious looking profile. Then she checked her followers—a total of 88—out of which she knew nobody.

The next day, as per Kamble’s plan, Rivanah went to Infinity Mall along with Ishita. She spotted Danny with Nitya in the food court and made a hue and cry over it. She surprised herself with her acting skills. She left the spot making sure everyone present in the food court remembered her well.

Once home, she was confused about what would happen next. She called Kamble once who asked her to relax and wait for the stalker's message. His confidence surprised Rivanah. Kamble wasn't wrong because a message did come late in the evening from the same unknown number that had asked her to forget Danny.

So, Danny is history.

Rivanah immediately called Kamble who told her over phone what exactly her reply to the stalker should read like.

I didn't know Danny would turn out to be such a dog. Why are men like that? she messaged back.

Not every man is a dog. The response came. Rivanah shared it with Kamble who again framed her response for her.

The ones in my life were. And I have lost hope now. She messaged.

You deserve someone who can give you lifelong loyalty.

Do loyal men exist in real? If yes then will I get that lucky?

Of course. A girl like you deserves all the luck.

Really? Where will I get such a man?

Right here.

OMG. I don't believe this.

And I promise I won't leave you mid-way.

She called Kamble again, asking him what her next response should be. Briefed by Kamble Rivanah messaged:

Are you saying you will marry me, stranger?

A smiley came in as a reply. When she told Kamble about it, he assured her the stranger was on the verge of being caught.

The next message from the unknown number read: *how about meeting up tomorrow?*

27

At around 3 pm the next day, Rivanah was on her way to Infinity Mall in Malad west, the place where the stranger said he would meet her.

I will be waiting for you inside Starbucks. I will order my coffee in your name, said the last message for the night read.

Finally, the time had come to meet the stranger and to know why exactly he was so interested in her. Was he someone she knew from before? Or was he really a stranger? Sitting in the autorickshaw all by herself, Rivanah was nervous. It would have helped if Danny had accompanied her, but Kamble had strictly asked him not to.

‘This guy now knows that you have broken up with Danny. I don’t want to take a chance. What if he follows you to the mall?’ Kamble had said. He had a point. In fact, this time he didn’t allow Ishita to accompany her as well.

As the autorickshaw halted itself at a traffic signal, Rivanah peeped out and looked around. There were no familiar faces. Her phone rang. It was Danny. She picked it up immediately.

‘Thank you for calling. I’m petrified,’ Rivanah said.

‘Just chill sweetheart. I know it is tough for you but it’s a matter of only some more time now. After this, that bugger won’t disturb you ever again,’ Danny said.

‘I know. I just hope it all goes off smoothly.’

‘It will. I had a talk with Kamble a few minutes back. They are already there in Starbucks in plain clothes. I too shall be there.’

‘Oh! Did Kamble ask you to?’

‘No but I want to smash the rascal’s face when he approaches you. Don’t worry I shall be incognito.’

‘Take care baby. I don’t want you to get hurt.’

‘And I don’t want any scoundrel to hurt you.’

‘I love you Danny.’

‘Love you too Rivanah.’

The phone call ended.

‘Idhar roku?’ The autorickshaw driver asked her looking at her in the rear-view mirror.

‘Peeche wale gate par,’ she instructed. He stopped the auto at the mall’s back gate. Rivanah wished the ride had not come to an end. She paid the driver and walked inside the mall.

Once the security let her pass through, she literally stared at every male that her eyes could spot. She took the escalator to the left of the entrance. Nobody in particular seemed to be looking at her. The guys who were indeed looking at her were actually checking her out; she knew

that look well. Soon she reached Starbucks. She took a deep breath and went inside.

The order and payment counter was inside, so she slowly ambled towards it. She wanted to look around but her neck felt stiff. She removed her shades once reaching the order counter.

'Good evening ma'am,' the boy at the counter said.

'Hi,' she replied back.

'What would you like to order today? Anything hot or cold?'

For a moment she felt tongue-tied.

'Ma'am?'

'A simple cappuccino.'

'Certainly ma'am.' As the boy busied himself punching the amount on his machine, Rivanah turned her head. She spotted Kamble and immediately turned her face away. A sweat drop trickled down her scruff. When the boy handed her the bill, she took out her wallet from her purse and

handed him the amount. As she kept the change back in her wallet, she noticed the boy write 'Rivanah 2' on a plastic glass.

'I ordered only one coffee,' she said.

'I know ma'am but coincidentally someone else also has ordered with the same name.'

It meant the stranger was already in Starbucks. She felt the stiffness in the neck now travel to her back. Somehow she managed a stupid smile at the boy behind the counter. She went ahead and took a seat by a table for two from where she could see Kamble from the corner of her eyes. She put on her shades to look around without being watched. She nervously started toying with her phone. Seconds turned into minutes. Then someone shouted, 'Rivanah 1'. She wanted to turn and see who approached the counter but was too nervous and shaky to do so. She dropped her phone on the table as her hands began to tremble. *By now the coffee must have been taken,* she thought, because there

wasn't a second announcement. Slowly she turned her head toward the counter and her jaws dropped immediately.

By the payment counter, Kamble and his men had pinned a guy by his collar. The guy was trying hard to free himself but in vain. Rivanah focussed on the guy's face and identified him soon enough.

What the fuck is Abhiraj doing here? was her first thought. Her muscles instantly relaxed. She suddenly felt energetic. Rivanah stood up and went to him.

'Abhiraj? Don't tell me you are the one who...'

'Rivanah, please I can explain. Please ask these men to leave me,' Abhiraj was fidgeting helplessly.

'Let's take this mister-secret-lover to the real love den.' said Kamble to his men. They almost dragged Abhiraj out. Rivanah too followed but slowed down when she met Danny by the entrance.

'Do you know him?' Danny asked.

‘Yes,’ she said and briefed him about Abhiraj as they followed the police team out.

◆

Abhiraj was taken straight to the police station.

‘You will be charged with section 354, d, for stalking, section 354 for assaulting a woman with intent to outrage her modesty, 506 for making an indecent video of hers, and also 509 for having gestured intending to outrage the modesty of a woman,’ Kamble said thrashing him hard.

Abhiraj was given a chance to clarify only when Rivanah told Kamble that she knew him and his family well. By then his nose was bleeding, his lips were bruised, his face had a red texture from thrashing, and his left eye was somewhat swollen.

‘I give you five minutes to clarify whatever you have to say and then willingly accept whatever you have done. After which I want the clip you

recorded of Rivanah,' Kamble said in a threatening voice.

'Clip?' Abhiraj looked at everyone present there one by one with an expression as if someone had told him that he didn't have a dick.

'Abhiraj, why are you making things difficult for you? Just tell me why were you after me since I came to Mumbai? I promise I won't let them punish you severely,' Rivanah said politely.

'I don't know what you are talking about Rivanah. I didn't follow you.' Abhiraj was weeping like a kid. 'When we met in February I didn't tell you that the new company I joined had its headquarters in Mumbai. So I had to come here anyway. I had your phone number and honestly after I met you at the marriage I couldn't forget you. I wanted to pursue you since I knew your marriage with Danny had a big "if" in it.'

Rivanah and Danny exchanged a stern look and together looked at Abhiraj again who continued

saying, ‘I thought of seducing you away from Danny. So I gifted you the studs and the negligee. When you seemed to respond to the messages I sent you from the unknown number, I was convinced that you didn’t love Danny as much and that if I pushed you a bit, you may actually be mine. I was happy when you two broke-up in the mall. I thought after Danny, you would give me a chance. And I swear I don’t have any clip of yours.’

Does it mean it was a coincidence that the real stranger and Abhiraj’s message came in one after the other? And did she link it all like a fool because both came from unkown numbers? Rivanah wondered.

‘What’s the password?’ Kamble said taking Abhiraj’s mobile phone from the constable who had confiscated it from Starbucks. Abhiraj told him the correct password. Kamble searched his phone but didn’t find any clip. He kept it with himself to be checked by an expert team.

‘Do you believe this guy?’ Kamble asked Rivanah.

Abhiraj looked pleadingly at her.

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Please Rivanah. My career will be over. I did what I did only to woo you. Nothing else. I never in my wildest dreams thought it will all come down to this,’ Abhiraj said.

Kamble gestured to the constable who held Abhiraj by his arms to take him away to the lock up when Rivanah stopped them. She went close to Abhiraj and sniffed him. It was not the deodorant that she was expecting.

‘Answer me honestly Abhiraj. Do you use “Just Different”?’

‘What’s that?’

Rivanah looked at Kamble and said, ‘I don’t think he is the man.’

‘Why?’ Kamble said.

‘If he never used “Just Different” deodorant then he isn’t the stranger.’

‘How are you so sure?’

‘I have smelled him closely thrice. In McDonald’s as well as the night I was attacked and also once when he approached me in the elevator of my building. He uses the “Just Different” deodorant from Hugo Boss.’

‘Who approached you?’ Abhiraj asked.

‘A stranger.’

‘Hmm,’ Kamble looked at the floor once with one hand on his hips and the other scratching his chin and then told the constable in Marathi to go and search Abhiraj’s place for the deodorant.

‘Can I call my father?’ Abhiraj pleaded. Kamble took his father’s phone number and called him himself. Mr Mukherjee promised him that he would take the next flight to Mumbai.

‘I think you should inform your parents too,’ Kamble told Rivanah.

She looked at Danny for help.

'Excuse us please,' Danny told Kamble and pulled Rivanah to a corner.

'What is it?' he asked.

'I don't want to tell my parents about this.'

'But Abhiraj's parents may tell them about it.'

'I don't think being arrested for stalking a girl is something his father will tell my parents. But if I tell my parents about all this, I'm sure they will emotionally blackmail me to resign from work and get back to Kolkata. I just know it. And then...'

'What are you more scared of really?'

'I don't want to lose touch with you. I know you won't be able to shift to Kolkata even if I do.'

'Hmm. Can't you just request Abhiraj's father not to tell anything to your parents?'

'That's the only way out, it seems.'

'And what is it about the "Just Different" deodorant. You never told me about it before? Even I use it.'

‘You don’t have to tell this to the police,’ Rivanah cautioned him.

‘Come,’ Danny said and together joined Kamble again.

‘Sir, I think we will not divulge the matter to her parents as of now.’

Kamble first looked at Danny and then at Rivanah. Studying their faces he said, ‘As you wish.’

‘It means the stranger is still out there watching me,’ Rivanah said.

‘Relax. Let’s first confirm if what Abhiraj is saying is even true. Then we will think about what to do next,’ Kamble said.

Rivanah knew Abhiraj was correct. He couldn’t have followed her since the past eleven months. It was only a matter of wrong timing that his messages were construed as being the stranger’s. Perhaps, knowing this, the stranger had intentionally kept a distance from her all these

days. He had been watching this comedy of errors silently, she thought, feeling her dry throat.

'May I have some water?' she asked.

'Sure,' Kamble said and asked a constable to get her a glass of water. As she finished drinking the water, she kept the glass on the table. Danny was at a corner answering an important phone call. They were asked to wait till the constables brought Abhiraj back. Kamble went to check on another thief who had been brought in. Meanwhile Rivanah checked her phone. There was a message and a few Whatsapp messages. She viewed the message first:

Inky pinky ponky,
Mini had a donkey.
Donkey caught, Mini smiled a lot,
Inky pinky ponky.

'Kamble sir,' Rivanah stood up holding her phone. Kamble as well as Danny rushed to her.

'What happened?' Kamble said.

She handed him her phone. Kamble read the message and said aloud, ‘Mother fucker!’

‘What happened?’ Danny said.

‘This is my wife’s phone number. She told me she had lost it yesterday.’ Kamble sat down on his chair feeling angry and frustrated.

28

When was the last time you made a mistake Mini? A terrible, terrible mistake?

Rivanah read the message again for the umpteenth time that morning. She had answered it for the stranger but he didn't seem to accept it. Could this have the clue to the puzzle that this stranger was?

Five days had gone by since Abhiraj's arrest in Starbucks. Ishita was in her office while Asha had gone to her hometown. Rivanah had her bags packed since morning. It was time to shift someplace else. Danny had a friend who was shifting to the UK for six months and was more

than willing to rent out his friends the two-bedroom flat that his father owned in Lokhandwala.

The constables didn't get the concerned deodorant at Abhiraj's place. When the analysis of the messages sent to Rivanah from different phone numbers came in, it was clear that the clip was sent from a different location that was closer to Rivanah's place while the message that Abhiraj sent was from Andheri west. The last message that was sent from Kamble's wife's phone number confirmed that Abhiraj was not the stranger. It was indeed a coincidence that Abhiraj started luring Rivanah using unknown numbers and she misunderstood him to be the stranger.

On Abhiraj's request, and with slight help from Rivanah, the police agreed not to tell his father on what ground was he brought into custody. He was allowed to leave when Rivanah withdrew her complaint. Kamble promised her that he would not

rest till the stranger was caught even though they had no leads as such. Kamble did question the slum kids but again reached a dead end. Rivanah could have told Kamble about Malati and Ratna but didn't. The police would harass them and it was something she didn't want them to go through, knowing well the innocent mother-daughter duo had nothing to do with all this.

The stranger had not messaged or tried to contact her since Abhiraj was caught. That was five days before. She hoped it was finally over because now the stranger knew the police was involved. Pursuing her in spite of it would be a risky affair.

The doorbell rang. Rivanah sprang up on her feet and picked her bag up. She was ready to leave with Danny to the new flat.

She opened the door to see Kamble beaming.

'Congratulations,' he said.

For a moment Rivanah thought the stranger had been caught.

'Where is he?' she asked.

'Oh no. We haven't been able to catch him yet. I'm congratulating you because the honourable court gave its verdict today regarding the gangrape victim; life imprisonment for both the men. You will read about it in newspapers tomorrow.'

Kamble had told her earlier in the week about the verdict date but she had forgotten about it completely since the incident at Starbucks.

'That's great,' she said.

'By the way, meet inspector Suresh Patil of crime branch,' Kamble said.

It was then she noticed the man standing beside Kamble. Patil shook Rivanah's hand.

'Did you get any promising leads?' she said looking at Kamble.

'The stranger lived on the flat above yours.'

'What? How do you know?'

‘We located every owner of the flat in this building.’ Patil preferred to answer. ‘Some live here and some have put up their flats on rent like the one you stay in. Only the owner of the particular flat above yours lives in Australia. When my team contacted him, he clearly said he had not given it up on rent whereas the guard told me he had seen the flat unlocked many a times and yet he didn’t exactly know who lived there.’

‘Shit! Is the flat open now?’

‘Yes. Come with me. I need to show you something,’ Kamble said. Rivanah was about to lock the door to her flat when Patil stopped her. He said he’ll take a look around while she followed Kamble upstairs.

Rivanah noticed the flat above hers was completely empty. Kamble called a constable who came to him with a plastic packet inside which she could see few pieces of cloth as Kamble dangled the packet in front of her. She didn’t take time to

realize it was a set of undergarments; a bra and a panty cut into pieces.

'Do you...'

'They are mine,' said an embarrassed Rivanah. She was wearing the pair on the night the stranger attacked her.

'Hmm, I guessed so.' Kamble gave the packet to the constable. He got a call on his phone. He went outside to talk. Rivanah went to the window in the drawing room and looking down at her flat below wondered: whenever she was there talking, he was here listening. But he never made himself visible. Anonymity is power, he had once told her. What did he want with such power? She was lost in thoughts for some time. A girl's laughter echoed in the empty flat taking her by surprise. There was nobody. She was about to turn toward the window when she again heard the laughter. She rushed to the bedroom but found nobody. Then she went to the toilet, the bathroom, the kitchen; there was

nobody anywhere. She ran to the main door calling out to Kamble. He was checking the doorbell along with a man who was unscrewing the doorbell's socket on the wall beside the main door.

'What happened?' he said looking at a worried Rivanah.

'That girl's laughter...' she said.

'It's the doorbell,' Kamble said and pressed the doorbell again. The girl's laughter echoed in the empty flat. The laughter reminded her of something. Rivanah had heard it somewhere before or so she thought.

'We are wondering if it has anything to do with the stranger,' she heard Kamble say. 'Do you know this laughter by any chance?' he asked.

Rivanah thought hard. And then a name occurred to her. How could she forget it? The person used to be a good friend of hers in her engineering college.

'I knew there would be something.' Kamble exclaimed. He took out a small roll from inside the

doorbell socket which unfolded to a small piece of white cloth similar to the ones, which he too knew, Rivanah had been receiving from the stranger. Kamble read what was stitched in it in black thread before handing it over to Rivanah.

Fate is a smell Mini. Follow it hard without struggle and you shall reach me.

'Never before in my service have I seen someone communicating with the means of embroidery,' Kamble remarked.

Holding the cloth in her hand, Rivanah quietly recollected every major thing that had happened to her since she came to Mumbai for the first time. Certain dots formed in her mind and to join them she called her mother purely on an instinct.

'Hello mumma, are you at home?'

'Yes, why?' Mrs Bannerjee was taken aback by the urgency in her daughter's voice.

'Please go to my room.'

'What happened?'

‘Please don’t waste time mumma. It’s important. I need you to find something for me.’

Her mother did as asked. Half a minute later she said, ‘I am in your room.’

‘Go to my study table and pull out the last drawer.’

‘Now in the end you will see a slam-book. Can you see it?’

Her mother moved some of the college text books to get to the slam book.

‘Yes. It’s in my hands now.’

‘Open it and look for a girl named Hiya.’

‘Hiya?’

‘Hiya Chowdhury.’

There was silence.

‘Mumma?’

‘I forgot my specs downstairs.’

‘Oh mumma, be quick.’ The impatience was killing Rivanah.

Another minute went by before she heard her mother say, ‘I have found Hiya Chowdhury on your slam book. Now?’

‘Now read whatever is written on it.’

‘Name: Hiya Chowdhry. Friends call me...’ And her mother went on till she reached a particular section.

‘Favourite dish: Spanish omelette, Kadhai paneer, and Butter chicken.

Hobby: embroidery.

Ambition: To work in an NGO for rape and domestic violence victims.

Favourite pass time: To teach kids.’

Mrs Bannerjee finished reading Hiya Chowdhury’s profile in the slam book. The uncanny resemblance of the incidents that had happened since she was in Mumbai with the information in the slam book had turned Rivanah cold.

‘Anything more?’ Rivanah’s throat had gone bone dry.

‘There’s a note for you where she signed her name. Should I read that too?’ her mother asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Know your worth,’ her mother said.

Rivanah swallowed a big stifling lump. She cut the line immediately and called her friend Pooja in Hyderabad. The latter picked up the call on the fourth ring.

‘Hey, what’s up?’ she said.

‘What do you know about Hiya Chowdhury?’ Rivanah asked.

‘Who? The girl who hanged herself to death from a ceiling fan last year?’

Death...hanging from a ceiling fan... As the nightmare that has been haunting her from sometime now flashed in front of her, Rivanah struggled to find her own voice.

(To be continued...)

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Next in the ‘Stranger’ trilogy…

After learning about Hiya Chowdhury’s scrapbook details from her mother, Rivanah is left dumbfounded. The eerie similarities between her nightmares and Hiya’s death don’t let her rest in peace. She immediately books her ticket to Kolkata. She’ll have to go to Hiya’s house to find the truth behind it all. With such a blatant reference to Hiya Chowdhury, has the stranger finally given Rivanah the lead to find him? But why would he do that? And what does he want from her?

Rivanah can’t wait to get the answers, but will her search really lead her on the right path or take

her further down into some sinister labyrinth designed by the stranger? Along the way, Rivanah will discover dark secrets about her own self...those that may resurrect her or destroy her forever.

All this and more in Book 2 of the Stranger trilogy...

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